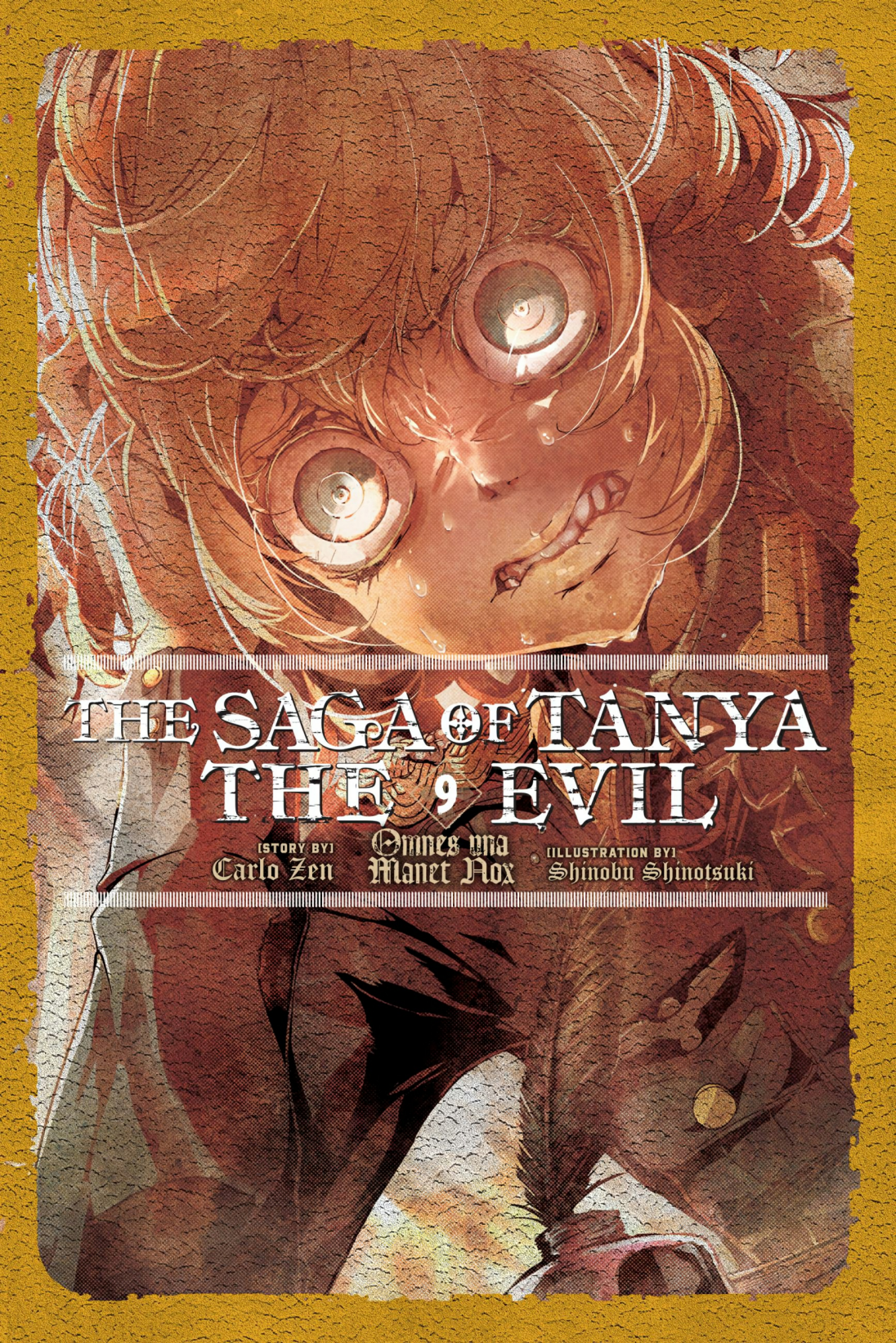
THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL
9
[STORY BY]
Carlo Zen
Omnes una Manet Nox
[ILLUSTRATION BY]
Shinobu Shinotsuki

Omnes una manet nox

# THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL

"In other words, this is the most perfect, holy-guided torpedo."
"It's a truly revolutionary weapon!"

General Zettour
Chronically overworked / Needs rest
Lieutenant Colonel Drake
Stomach pains / Needs to get a handle on his stress
First Lieutenant Sue
Physically, she's very healthy!

# THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL

## Omnes una Manet Nox

〔9〕

Carlo Zen

Illustration by Shinobu Shinotsuki

YEN ON
New York

# Copyright

The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Vol. 9
Carlo Zen

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Cover art by Shinobu Shinotsuki

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# Relationship Chart

## Federation

General Secretary (very respectful person)

Loria (very respectful person)

【Multinational Unit】

- Colonel Mikel **(Federation, commander)** — First Lieutenant Tanechka **(political officer)**
- Lieutenant Colonel Drake **(Commonwealth, second-in-command)** — First Lieutenant Sue

## Kingdom of Ildoa

General Gassman **(army administration)** — Colonel Calandro **(intelligence)**

## The Free Republic

Commander de Lugo **(head of the Free Republic)**

## Empire

【General Staff】

- Lieutenant General von Zettour **(Service Corps, inspector of the eastern front)** — Lieutenant Colonel Uger **(Service Corps, Railroad)**
- Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf **(Operations)** — Colonel von Lergen

**Salamander Kampfgruppe** (aka Lergen Kampfgruppe)

**203rd Aerial Mage Battalion**

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff

- Major Weiss
  - First Lieutenant Serebryakov
  - First Lieutenant Grantz
  - (replacement) First Lieutenant Wüstemann

Captain Ahrens **(Armored)**

Captain Meybert **(Artillery)**

First Lieutenant Tospan **(Infantry)**

[ chapter ]

# I

## Erosion

**The people of the capital think they're sane.**
**Shockingly, they even dare to think they're the sensible ones.**

**Personal letter from the Salamander Kampfgruppe, after passing the censors**

# [chapter] I Erosion

**JUNE 29, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL CAPITAL BERUN**

*Rail* plus *road* makes *railroad*. Much like the Royal Road or the Roman highways of yore, these are the arteries of states. In the modern day, railroads are aortas of steel spanning vast distances, linking cities to cities, and of course, the fatherland to the war front.

The railroad is notable for connecting critical points and facilitating the movement of goods and citizens. More importantly, it organically binds otherwise disparate entities into a nation-state.

To the Empire, a land-based military powerhouse, there could be no better method of wartime transport than rail. Resilient and reliable infrastructure is the cornerstone of any war machine.

That is what makes the railroad the source of our power.

So to call imperial capital Berun's front door, Central Station, the heart that pumps life through its network of tracks and trains might even be an understatement.

After all, the level of strain this system is regularly subjected to would be far too much for a body of flesh and blood. It can only be sustained by a heart of steel, arterial railways, and a densely populated core that runs on steam.

As far as Tanya can tell from her view through the window of the passenger car, which is slowly pulling into the station, there is no end to the stream of arriving trains, passengers jumping on or off them, and people bidding them farewell.

Though it doesn't quite live up to the flowery language featured in the newspaper she just hurled at an empty seat in disgust…the scene certainly does speak to the "strength of the Empire."

Most of the cargo being loaded must be military supplies. Succinct proof that this state, the Empire, is steadily sending supplies to the front lines and receiving them from the factories.

The view of the hustle and bustle outside the first-class window is the same as always.

"I guess…I made it back."

The deeply emotional words escape Tanya's lips in a quiet murmur.

…What a fortunate turn of events that she was able to leave the eastern front before the dry season arrived, bringing with it renewed major combat operations. Though fierce fighting continues unabated on the eastern front, the military is at least maintaining the bare minimum of sending units back for reorganization and rest.

This is why even the veteran Lergen Kampfgruppe has gotten a chance to return home for recuperation and resupply. Maybe Lieutenant General Zettour is looking out for us more than I thought.

*As if.* Tanya smiles wryly. "Our losses are too high to be ignored. And considering how much heavy equipment we need to replace, there's nothing special about being rotated out."

Some heavy equipment needs to be transported separately, so Captains Ahrens and Meybert are buried in shipping documentation and requisition forms—all evidence that the bureaucracy is steadily working on our reorganization in the home country.

Knowing that it means parting from the yells of the Federation soldiers, their unending assaults, and their bizarrely well-armored arsenal, even my warmongers must be happy to dig into some paperwork for a change.

A light knock on the door interrupts those thoughts. The one requesting entry is First Lieutenant Serebryakov.

"Colonel, we've arrived!"

Beaming as she delivers her report, Tanya's adjutant looks incredibly happy for some reason. Maybe it would be more accurate to say she's carefree?

"Home at last."

"Yes, it's been so long since we were last in the capital. We finally made it back."

Her subordinate's voice is cheerful, but Tanya clearly isn't in a good enough mood to smile back.

“This homecoming has its own share of issues. The temperature difference between the front lines and the rear may drive me insane.” Tanya points meaningfully at the newspaper she just cast aside as she continues. “When I read this, I didn’t get it at all.”

“…True, things have become a bit complicated.”

“Lieutenant, it is a form of kindness to call these people out for what they really are—idiots. I don’t know who censored this, but apparently the folks in the rear have no idea what the real world is like.”

While aboard the capital-bound train carrying us away from the east, some part of my mind had been blinded by the abstract idea of safety in the rear despite the weight of what Zettour had shared.

It was only after glancing through the newspaper being sold on the train that it became depressingly clear that I needed to revise my expectations.

“I can’t believe the nonsense running rampant in the rear. It’s staggering.”

We’ve been stuck playing with the Commies in a salient on the forward-most lines, so I suppose an information gap reminiscent of Urashima Taro was unavoidable.

“On the front lines, so far removed from civilization, there’s no ready access to periodicals or news. But reading one now makes me feel like I’m going insane. Did the war break me, or did those in the rear lose their minds at some point while I wasn’t looking? What do you think?”

“…Ah…ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“How can anyone be talking about the superiority of the Imperial Army in the east with a straight face? According to this reporter, we’re enjoying three hot meals of meat and hearty soup every day on the eastern front… Where the hell was I when that happened?”

Surely even my wincing adjutant understands. Censorship only allows the officially sanctioned version of events to be reported.

“Maybe we should invite the censors for a tour. I wouldn’t mind letting them see what our meals are like for a day.”

It’ll be nothing but trouble unless they start facing reality.

Of course, Tanya doesn’t need anyone to tell her that wartime newspapers are hopelessly biased and packed to the gills with propaganda.

Moreover, I’ve known since long ago that they generally end up being excessively patriotic or hopelessly pro-war due to the naïveté of censors. Even though it’s been a while since I’ve gotten my hands on a newspaper, I

believe I went in with a decent idea of what to expect.

I thought I would simply have to read between the lines. To anyone with a bit of sense, the truth should be self-evident.

Except it wasn't.

If it were an article with an unacceptable tone, that would've been unpleasant but still tolerable. How to interpret the truth is a matter of an individual's conscience and intelligence, after all. Freedom of thought must be respected.

That's all fine and good.

*If that was it*, there wouldn't be any problem at all.

The description of meals made the whole article sound like a report from HQ. When even descriptions of imperial achievements and the overall state of the war litter the page with half-truths, I want to groan regardless of who may be watching.

The moment the paper landed in my hands, I nearly ripped it apart in anger but instead hurled it at my puzzled subordinate and called the orderly on duty to demand, "Either you bring hot soup and meat for all my troops, or you round up every newspaper on this train for me." The natural response was a mountain of papers.

In other words, there would be no grand meal forthcoming. Upon amassing every newspaper on the train, anyone observing Tanya would probably describe her expression as a fearsome scowl. What a perfect face for disembarking in the supposedly pleasant rear.

"Lieutenant, propaganda is supposed to persuade others, no?"

"Ummm, yes."

"Well, it appears that somewhere along the way, the propagandists started believing their own made-up material. This is what it means to be beyond saving."

The idea of cultivating a spirit of perseverance to support the war effort isn't a bad idea in and of itself. But anyone returning from the front is almost guaranteed to have a thing or two to say after reading articles that claim they were fed three hot meals a day and all the meat they could eat.

"Haaah." A heavy sigh escapes Tanya as she rises from her seat.

"…Sorry to bore you with my complaints."

"No, the disparity between the mood on the front and in the rear is very palpable… I understand how you feel, ma'am."

Between the polite smile and the way she replied, Tanya's adjutant really knows how to get along with people. In other words, she's capable…but not everyone is the same.

Tanya's subordinates are human, too. That is say, they are unique individuals. Even war nuts come in different flavors. Maybe that's why…

"Ah," she says, remembering something. "My life would be much easier if everyone were as sharp as you, Lieutenant. Make sure everyone in the Kampfgruppe is properly briefed before they go on leave."

"Yes, ma'am."

Just as Tanya is replying—"Good"—she hears a cheer go up from outside the car. The soldiers must be excited setting foot in the homeland for the first time in ages.

I understand that feeling very well.

"Sounds like everyone has deboarded. We should also get a move on."

Tanya is an officer returning from the front lines, so her personal effects are in her officer's luggage, while any loot that might have counted as a souvenir from the eastern front is packed with the rest of the Kampfgruppe's gear.

Meaning all there is left to do is grab her bag.

Then, ignoring the step, which is a bit high given her height, Tanya jumps down to the platform, solidly planting her feet on home soil.

The beloved fatherland.

The safe rear.

It's what everyone longs for.

Of course, Tanya is no exception. Every day away felt like a thousand years, and she even saw this moment in her dreams.

"Excuse me, are you part of the Lergen Kampfgruppe? Er, can you direct me to an officer?"

"Hrm? You're not part of the General Staff, are you?"

"I'm with the Reichsbahn… May I have a word?"

"I'm leaving it in your hands, Lieutenant."

Letting my adjutant handle it, I once again fall deep into thought. I've been distracted by the idea of three hot meals, but too many other things require my attention. Yet, on the eastern front, the all-too-crucial free time had been in desperately short supply.

Readiness is born from redundancy. To achieve maximum performance, one must pursue both efficiency and redundancy.

It's precisely because I don't have to worry about an enemy attack that I can think clearly.

Of course, I'm not advancing a worthwhile project, or doing human resource planning with an eye on a hopeful future, or even brainstorming a corporate-branding strategy that will contribute to society—no, I'm spending all my time pondering an utterly unproductive war.

What a waste of intellectual labor. The fact that it's unavoidable is especially loathsome.

It's simple enough to start a war. Any fool can do it by firing a single bullet.

Just look at Sarajevo.

Even a wise man can be killed as the result of mindless stupidity. And the fool responsible rarely cares what the consequences are. It's precisely because they're so brain-dead that they're capable of pulling the trigger in the first place.

People with unshakable convictions have dreamed of steeling themselves and reluctantly starting a just war since time immemorial. An idiot too certain of their righteousness and drunk on their personal brand of justice is sure to cause an awful lot of trouble for the world.

It's simple really—a rat race between dimwits acting like buffoons and the cleaners who have to go in and mop up the mess they leave behind.

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff stands on the military platform in the imperial capital with only one thought on her mind: *When a person becomes convinced they are the only sane person left, what sort of diaper should they have on hand?*

This isn't childcare or a nursery. Why should I have to worry about this sort of thing? Despite the outward frown, when I recall the anxiety I felt about socks on the eastern front, I resign myself to the notion that work will always creep in unexpected directions.

"…Well, damn, this is pessimistic even for me."

I manage to avoid sighing in front of the troops, but I've been bottling up so many worries that I'm almost convinced my mind is experiencing global warming. At least I don't have to worry about getting hit with a carbon tax.

Shaking her head and looking up, Tanya notices her adjutant coming

back. Personnel who move with such urgency are hard to find.

But the report she hurriedly brings back isn't a good one.

"Colonel, the General Staff dispatched trucks for us, but…apparently they're running late."

"What?" Tanya reverts her partially furrowed brow. "Ah, never mind. Thanks, Lieutenant. We can wait here, then."

Needless to say, tardiness is inexcusable. Being on time is essential to the smooth operation of any enterprise. And in the military, it's practically law. But this is the General Staff we're talking about. Presumably, there's a reason they're behind schedule.

Snapping at the people who are hard at work won't change anything.

Anyone who blames the messenger for bad news is either stupid, inept, or irresponsible—in any case, they're fools fit for the firing squad.

Putting that aside, it's time to get down to business.

"Lieutenant, see if the Reichsbahn has somewhere specific they'd like us to wait. We're a large group. If we stay on the platform, we'll be in the way."

"Yes, ma'am. Shall I also proceed with sending our cargo along?"

"Fine by me. And if necessary, start making arrangements for granting the troops leave, too. That includes issuing the relevant paperwork."

Time shouldn't be wasted. We have to do what we can when we can.

"Most of it probably has to go through the General Staff, but let's at least confirm with the Reichsbahn that there are seats for people traveling home. It's one thing to say there's enough space; it's another to actually know if we'll be able to fit our people on the trains."

"Then I'll look into the long-distance trains first."

"Hmm. For now, we can probably have the soldiers apply themselves. If it's for leave, even the ones who hate paperwork will probably fill out the forms correctly."

I want time off, too. I need to turn in my own request.

If Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff hands them to Colonel Lergen, and the application is approved in his name, even she should be able to secure some form of vacation.

"I really need to figure out my own vacation."

Just as Tanya is about to cheerfully consider what to do with her time off, she comes under surprise attack. Reality never pulls any punches.

"Oh, there you are, Colonel."

A casual voice. But its owner is one rank higher—he's a full colonel.

"It's been quite a while since we last met. Well, I suppose we've officially seen each other more than a few times if you go by the records, but…"

"Colonel Lergen?!"

Instantly raising a salute, Tanya snaps back into work mode.

The colonel who was supposed to be in Ildoa on a diplomatic mission has gone out of his way to meet her. This can only mean trouble.

"You're back in the Empire, sir?"

"The Lergen Kampfgruppe is in the capital on leave. There's nothing strange about me being here."

He delivers the official story smoothly, but he's looking paler than Tanya has ever seen him.

More importantly, his tone of voice…

This man used to be much more serious. Uptight even… The change is remarkable.

Was it the stress of war that caused this sarcastic, cynical attitude?

War *is* far too uncivilized for the average person to bear without bending.

That said, I shouldn't speculate.

"You'll need to report in at headquarters. We must make sure the official record is consistent."

"Of course, sir."

"But first, let me deliver some happy news. Kampfgruppe! For your leave…we booked a resort!" Seeing that he's caught the attention of all the soldiers, he raises his voice before he continues. "The General Staff insisted. And for those who would like to return home, we'll be supplying first-class tickets. You've all done a tremendous job! It's a short break, but I hope you enjoy your time in the capital!"

A wave of cheers and applause goes up.

Amid the clamor of celebration, Lergen grasps Tanya's hand in a formal handshake.

"You've also outdone yourself, Colonel."

"Thank you, sir."

Nodding as if finding that response satisfactory, he raises his voice so the others can hear him again. "The transport trucks are running late, but they should be here in twenty minutes or so. Maybe I'm jumping the gun a bit, but I have the ration coupons for your troops here. Go ahead and hand them out

to everyone while you wait."

Receiving a glance implying that she should make arrangements, Tanya immediately delegates the task to her vice commander.

"Major Weiss. I'm leaving that up to you."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Weiss moves like he's on a combat mission and gathers the officers to review what they want to do, leaving Tanya and Lergen almost completely alone.

A little pocket of space opens up in the middle of the station.

"Lieutenant Serebryakov, was it? Sorry, please leave us. Also, could you call a car?"

However, Lergen doesn't seem like he'll be satisfied with anything short of complete privacy.

"As the colonel says, Lieutenant."

"Yes, ma'am!"

My adjutant is setting off at a brisk pace. I'm sure she knows exactly what's going on and will return with impeccable timing.

Still, even if he has a request as an excuse, he's being pretty blatant about shooing her off. If he's insisting on being that thorough…

"My adjutant is quite trustworthy…"

"Necessity demands it."

What an awfully ominous thing to say.

"I'm here to brief you before you report in at the General Staff Office. Just three quick things."

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He nods and proceeds in a grave tone. "One: A fierce debate is raging between the General Staff and Supreme Command over a major operation in the east. The fact of the matter is, we've very nearly lost that argument. The general is only barely hanging on."

"A major operation?"

He lowers his voice before continuing, as if to say, *That's right*. "The setback of Operation Andromeda suggests the backbone of the Federation Army is sound as ever. So when the inevitable counterattack comes, we'll deal with it while trying to tighten up the lines. That was the original proposal the General Staff submitted for approval."

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He must be speaking quietly because he's conscious of those around us. But it almost seems as if the distress creeping into his voice is the true cause of his hushed tone.

"Supreme Command's response to the original plan was disastrous. They don't comprehend the principles of space and time. They're saying that if we want to give up ground to secure breathing room, they expect to see 'results.'"

"What does that mean, sir?"

"They want us to pull off a revolving door like we did on the Rhine front. The task this time is to re-create that operation… Meaning, the only thing that will justify a retreat is a large-scale battle to lure in and ultimately annihilate the enemy."

The only reason I don't ask if the nation's leaders have lost their collective minds is because I've known the answer for a long time. Though the army and the government are looking at the same world, they no longer both reside in it.

Where did it all go wrong?

"Anything that complicates the retreat will make it a high-risk operation…"

"Even so, that is what's being demanded of us—results that will bring an end to this war."

He delivers that surreal pronouncement in a tired voice.

"Colonel, sir… It can't be done."

"…I never thought I'd hear you say that."

"It's a staff officer's job to differentiate the possible from the impossible. The revolving door operation's feasibility was predicated on the existence of the lowlands. The terrain is completely different in the east."

"I'm well aware… I've seen it with my own eyes, Colonel." Lergen practically groans. "The east is vast."

That's the problem in a nutshell.

The eastern theater is just too big. That's why the Imperial Army is engaging in maneuver warfare.

It sounds impressive when we say we're outmaneuvering and destroying our enemies. It almost even sounds like we have the initiative.

Our agile troops have the sluggish Federation Army right where we want them!

It's the perfect propaganda headline. It could easily go on the front page of a newspaper.

But we're not fighting maneuver battles by choice. We've been forced into them. The Imperial Army has no other option.

On the sweeping eastern front, a textbook defensive position is a dream within a dream. There's simply too much ground to cover—meaning manpower, matériel, and just about everything else is in painfully short supply. Chronic deficiencies abound. Even divisions with exceptionally good luck that manage to stay well stocked aren't doing much better.

Every area that needs to be defended is shorthanded.

The inevitable result is that any defensive lines that do exist are concentrated around strongpoints. It would be more honest to admit that we're dependent on maneuver battles.

"But, Colonel, if that's the case, then how is the General Staff losing this debate? Simply continuing attempts to maintain the overstretched lines in the east will only cause irreparable attrition to our forces."

"…In order to stabilize the front, the Federation's reserves must be eliminated. We can't abandon the lines. True, it's a stopgap measure, but we have no choice but to ask the Eastern Army Group to conduct textbook offensive and defensive operations."

"You'll have to excuse me, but is such a thing even possible?"

We already can't create and hold proper lines. That's the current situation in the east. It's been ages since the front had a definite form like the trenches of the Rhine.

You can't conduct offensive and defensive operations to consolidate the front line if it doesn't exist. If they weren't standing in the station at the imperial capital, nothing would have been able to stop Tanya from shouting *Anyone who isn't a total imbecile can see that it's impossible!*

"…You raise a valid point. Ultimately, we'll probably get stuck carrying out a dramatic solution by attempting an encirclement with the hope of annihilating the enemy forces."

"There's a conflict there, sir. You know just as well as I do that we have no hope of drawing in and annihilating the Federation Army."

How are we supposed to surround the enemy on such a broad front? Encircling one wing of the enemy forces in the vicinity of Soldim 528 was already a bridge too far. What's more, Lieutenant General Zettour's direct

input was necessary even during smaller operations in the east.

…A major operation? How much more nonsense are we supposed to endure?

"If needed, we could selectively let some of the enemy forces break through. If we give it our best shot without worrying about appearances, it might be possible. At least, we should be able to pull it off once."

It's terrifying that he's saying all this with a straight face. The only explanation I can think of is that this armchair theory was thought up by someone who's completely ignorant of the situation on the eastern front. This isn't a game you can save and load to try again.

I can't believe they're abandoning the safe option.

"So we have no choice but to lure them in?"

Lergen's expression is taut as he silently nods, but Tanya has to point out something.

"If we misjudge the enemy's main thrust, it could start a chain reaction that ends with our entire army collapsing."

"…There's nothing more I can say. Though, given my position, I can't say we have no chance of success."

"Let's say we somehow manage to make it happen. Even then…"

Lergen cracks an uncharacteristic smile. "So there *are* times you side with optimism."

Is that a laugh or a scoff? His tone doesn't make it clear, but his comment is completely unexpected. Taken by surprise, Tanya involuntarily stiffens up.

I'm getting dubbed optimistic for attempting to argue about a hypothetical success? What brazen doublespeak! Just look at him matter-of-factly spouting the official stance while knowing full well this new operation is futile.

Time for Tanya to push a little harder.

"Even I don't expect us to lose. But on the off chance we do succeed, whether that'll be the decisive blow that will end the war…"

The operation the Imperial Army carried out back in May, Iron Hammer, was a brilliant success. It was probably the greatest victory we could have hoped for.

The Empire's goal has always been to annihilate the enemy field army, and Operation Iron Hammer was a crucial part of that strategy. You could say the objective was perfectly met. Fabulous results. Literal tons of supplies

seized. An advance covering an incredible distance! But even that major victory wasn't enough to get the job done!

On a fundamental level, the Federation Army is still standing tall. The beams of their foundation may be creaking somewhat, but they apparently aren't broken. Between the Empire, who has made the world its enemy, and the Federation, who now proudly stands alongside the rest of the world, there is a major disparity in the ability to replace losses.

Even the precision war machine of the Imperial Army is hard-pressed by this brutally simple yet undeniable gap in national strength in a contest of total war. How are we supposed to escape our fate?

"That's why we want to make it a powerful blow—according to the higher-ups, at least."

"…Then the first thing we need is air power."

We scrounged for what little assets were available and committed them all to achieve temporary aerial superiority in the east, but what does the sky look like now? It's all our forces can do to stay competitive over the heads of our troops.

If the brass is ready to do something drastic, that's one thing, but…

"What are the prospects of a large increase in air forces or getting some reassigned from other fronts? I mean no disrespect, but without control of the skies, a major operation in the east is…"

"We can't concentrate any more forces there. The industrial region in the west would burn. It's out of the question."

*Whoa, whoa.* Tanya's eyes widen in obvious shock. This seems like a risky topic to discuss on a station platform, but it clearly has to be addressed.

"…Isn't that the heart of imperial industry? Surely we've secured the skies over it?"

"That used to be true. It would appear you aren't aware of the current situation on the western front." Lergen emits a deep sigh. "We have practically no formidable units left. Raw recruits and a handful of veterans are operating together in mixed formations. No one is conducting proactive operations anymore; everyone has their hands full just holding out against the enemy."

Pitifully, he delivers this chilling news with a smile. How else could such a reality be conveyed?

"This is the second thing I came to tell you. The air war in the west has

taken a dramatic turn for the worse. We're even discussing withdrawing the expeditionary corps from the southern front so we don't need to send air support down there anymore. We're in negotiations with Ildoa, as well."

It's not that we're low on surplus power.

It simply doesn't exist. We've run dry. And right when we need to wring out every last bit of strength and scrape it together…

I've been under the impression that the severity of the situation is more than readily apparent, but the next thing out of Lergen's mouth is nothing short of paralyzing.

"In light of all this, you'll have to brace yourself once again. Even a capable unit like yours will probably stop getting replacements."

"…Is that for certain?"

"If nothing else, understand that getting high-caliber personnel will grow exceedingly difficult. To be blunt, there's almost no hope of getting any."

Veterans are the core of any organization.

This is the same as saying there will be no core.

"You're saying that even frontline units won't be able to get reliable replacements?"

"There aren't enough trained personnel… No one has any to spare."

We're missing the core. And there's nowhere we can go to get more. Even though general mobilization of the country's population has already happened!

The louts supporting this massive army can't scrape together any more personnel, even with the Empire's intricate modern bureaucracy?

*The beginning of the end.*

A horrific possibility. The all-too-plausible idea sends an unbearable chill up Tanya's spine. This situation is too grave to laugh off.

No new recruits.

No recent graduates.

This is what it'd be like if it wasn't possible for a company to hire kids coming out of college!

It's only a matter of time until we go under. If this was happening to someone else, my first thought would be that this is a great chance to poach some talented employees. A funny thought. But since it's happening to me, there's nothing funny about it.

As if to shed the awkward mood, Lergen shakes his head and leans in

closer. “On a final note, this hasn’t been officially decided yet, but I figured I should let you know.”

“What is it, sir?”

If it’s something that can make up for all this terrible news, then maybe he’s found a solution…? Tanya’s fists are balled up tight as she listens with feigned comfort.

“…I’m just sounding you out. So maybe brace yourself.”

Lergen’s tone is decidedly grim. Any hope I had been clinging onto collapses instantaneously, and I quickly revise my expectations.

It’s probably bad news. What’s curious is that the army has never once considered Tanya’s circumstances when dropping impossible tasks in her lap. Why would they be concerned about what she thinks all of a sudden?

Posing it as merely a personal conversation and unaware of the terror he’s inciting, Lergen pushes on.

“I’ve already said this much, but I really do hesitate. Let me have your ear.”

Given the difference in height, he’s almost crouching as he says this. It probably looks a bit scandalous, but…oh well.

Tanya quietly obliges and leans in closer.

“We may task you with bombing the capital.”

“…You mean a direct attack on Londinium?”

Aha. That *is* a big deal.

It’s a critical mission that requires the utmost secrecy, and we’ll have to be prepared to make sacrifices. If they’re expecting us to achieve results similar to our raid on Moskva, they need to realize that circumstances have changed since the beginning of the war…

“Colonel, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then…what? Moskva again?”

Considering the ferocious resistance the Commies are putting up…I really doubt that would succeed. It’s no wonder a bit of skepticism slips into Tanya’s voice. But apparently, even the pessimistic outlook is too optimistic, according to Lergen.

“No, Colonel Degurechaff.”

Lergen lays a hand on Tanya’s shoulder. Assuming it’s not my imagination, the man is trembling. Ever so slightly but still trembling.

“The target is…here.”

“Here?”

He lowers his voice, hesitates due to their surroundings, and then finally points at the ground and repeats himself. “Here. Where else could here be? I’m talking about Berun. The imperial capital Berun. Specifically, we’d like you to carry out a night raid on Supreme Command.”

“…Huh?”

It would appear that when humans feed incomputable data into their heads, they freeze.

A bombing order is nothing out of the ordinary for Tanya. Attacking a target at night is a simple enough request. Sure, I’m not opposed to that.

As a career soldier in the Imperial Army, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff is proud to have personally led an aerial mage battalion on a fair number of perfectly executed bombing raids.

That being said!

*Berun?!*

An order to bomb Berun?!

The fact that we’re still in public is gone from my mind. When Tanya replies, it’s almost a scream.

“B-but this is the imperial capital…?!”

Despite devoting every effort to the contrary, her voice shakes. Still squatting but refusing to meet her gaze, Lergen doesn’t seem very composed, either.

After a deep breath, he manages to say, “We need to wake up the politicians. We won’t ask you to actually drop bombs on them. The General Staff is just eager for an exercise that will crank up the pressure.”

He hastily tacks on an explanation of their…expectations. But even if they try to pass it off as an exercise, there’s a limit to how persuasive that’ll be.

“Excuse me, sir.” It’s quite a challenge for Tanya to keep her voice from shaking. “You want us to play the bizarre role of some fake enemy?” No matter how you look at it, this is one step away from a military coup d’état. Really, if anything goes wrong, it could end up sparking a real coup. “There’s absolutely no way we can target Supreme Command…”

“If we were going to attack the Commonwealth capital, that’s where we’d strike, right? It’s the same logic. We need a reason for both the attacking and defending sides to get serious.”

“So we’re going to cause a misunderstanding?”

“We’re making arrangements to chalk it up as a miscommunication. The General Staff has warned time and time again that the capital’s anti–air defenses are far from tight, so we decided to run an exercise to demonstrate, but due to a miscommunication, the sirens go off. That’s the idea.”

It’s a plausible cover story. So they’ll sound the alarm during our comedic interlude. But will Supreme Command really fall for it?

This seems like lunacy.

Who would volunteer to be part of a coup d’état unit all of a sudden? One wrong step and we’ll end up in a court-martial as traitors.

Tanya can’t say yes to this even to be affably polite.

“I have no interest in being shot at by allies. Especially if it’s amateurs—the horror. Shall I regale you with a tale of how an idiot observer tried to call in a strike on the Kampfgruppe on the eastern front?”

“In our present situation, if idiots shoot at you, then maybe you should let them shoot at you, Colonel.”

“…What?”

“The anti–air units will be alerted. Internal military communication is impeccable. It would actually be quite convenient if anyone does open fire.”

What’s he not saying?

This is already beyond dangerous.

“I beg your pardon, but I’m struggling to accept this. For starters, isn’t this the same as openly advertising that the capital’s air defense is vulnerable? We’d be practically inviting the Commonwealth to begin strategic bombing.”

“…Setting aside what will happen to the imperial capital for a moment, if the location where they feel safe is nearly bombed, I think even the politicians will be forced to open their eyes.”

Each and every word is brimming with disgust and hostility. Interesting. So Lergen hates politicians, too. That’s a surprising discovery, but it’s in times like these that those things rise to the surface. And the fact that he’s showing Tanya some true emotion is somewhat comforting.

Unlike his much more frank opinion about politicians, his reservations about Supreme Command are more roundabout. As for why he’s pushing this topic, there’s a slight but critical difference.

“Colonel… Are you serious about all this?”

“If the ends justify the means, then it’s clearly the quickest option.”

Meaning a viable alternative would be preferable?

At his core, Lergen seems like a sensible man. If that holds true, then his comment has far-reaching implications.

"…And if the ends don't justify the means, Colonel?"

"Couldn't you misfire some formulas in a way, on your discretion, that doesn't result in deaths? Mm, well, that's not fair to ask."

He turns back to her, and his face looks unwell as he forces his throat to work. He seems to have just barely gotten the words out.

"I beg your pardon, Colonel Lergen, but…"

Lergen isn't the type to say this sort of thing. I wouldn't go so far as to claim I have a rock-solid understanding of his character. That would be arrogant. But I think it's safe to consider him a respectable citizen in possession of both good sense and morals.

What could have brought about the sudden change in this man?

Tanya is naturally compelled to ask, "…What's going on?"

*Is he hesitating?*

His shoulders tremble slightly as he fishes out his cigar case.

"The success of Operation Iron Hammer was sensational. When news of it reached me, I was in Ildoa as part of our diplomatic mission there…and in that moment, I felt so grateful to you for opening a path to our fatherland's future."

"I'm honored, sir. Considering how the remarkable Commie resistance has driven us into a corner, the joy was short-lived, but…"

"Would you like a smoke? …Ah, wait. I can't offer you one."

"Colonel?"

"…Due to various concerns of the higher-ups, the provisional cease-fire never materialized. That's all I can say." Muttering something that sounds like *Never mind* under his breath, melancholy slips onto his face again as he stands. When he begins lighting his cigar, his movements are strangely aggressive.

"It should have been a shoo-in."

"Excuse me?"

"Ignore me. Even with my authority…I can't say any more."

"My apologies."

*Phew*, Lergen exhales wearily after a puff of his cigar. "We're soldiers. We follow our orders and do what we must when necessary. Sometimes, I

hate it, but…"

"Not to be improper, sir, but I agree." For Tanya, the problem is extremely simple—people use the word *necessary* and demand too much. "Though it's not the happiest thought, unlike many of our brothers-in-arms, we're still alive." Yes, we're alive. How wonderful. We should be more careful with human lives. Even faced with great need, throwing away lives can hardly be described as rational. "Even when others fall, we must ready our guns and carry on fighting the enemy. Or should we drown ourselves in sentimentality instead?"

"Honestly, you could say I'm already slipping under. Somehow lately, I feel I'm on dangerous footing. There are times it's hard to tell if I'm actually alive or not."

"Colonel?"

"History will most likely allege I was out east. That's what I'm getting at. What is truth and what is lie?"

A man who spent a leisurely time in Ildoa, a land blessed with plentiful sunshine, will be remembered as someone who stood on the eastern front. That's probably what Lergen is thinking in a moment of self-deprecation.

I'm not a big believer in favoring those who get their hands dirty. It's painfully apparent how quickly an entire organization can collapse when no one is properly handling the unsung work that goes on behind the scenes.

"Honestly, what are these deaths for? Why all this sacrifice?"

"Colonel?"

"Ah, no need to pay me any attention—I'm just griping. Whining in public won't help us…" He grumbles as he crushes the butt of his cigar under his boot.

It's plain to see that this isn't exactly the time for Tanya to volunteer that she had been griping to her adjutant back on the train. She simply gives him a polite smile and listens.

"God knows what'll happen to us next."

"The only thing I put my faith in is this," Tanya replies, pinging her computation orb with the flick of a finger.

The Elinium Arms Type 97 Assault Computation Orb… Unlike the cursed Type 95, this one is a gentle green color, good for both the body and spirit. Sadly, Lergen has basically just told Tanya not to expect any more mages capable of using the model.

…The Type 97 requires trial and error from even the replacements who received minimal training. It's entirely possible that the recruits we'll receive from here on out will have a higher chance of surviving if we equip them with Federation orbs instead.

What a horrific reality.

"Faith in yourself, eh? That's a fine belief."

With a soft chuckle, he finally puts on a socially acceptable expression. At a glance, his persona is completely serious and sober.

What an admirable mask.

"Let's report to General von Rudersdorf. I'll only be there as a formality, but I can at least convey the situation in Ildoa."

"Yes, sir!"

The time for sharing secrets has come to an end.

Unbelievable. The moment Tanya reaches home, her stomach and self-restraint are put to the test. As someone who prefers to simply focus on work, this whole exchange has just been a reminder that office politics is nothing but trouble.

Unfortunately, there's no escaping it.

What a pain.

Why can't everyone just concentrate on delivering the best work they can? It's vastly more effective for competitors to work toward a mutual goal rather than obstruct one another. Do they lack love for society? Life as we know it is only possible because society exists. Civilization is only possible because society exists. And ultimately, organizations of any kind are only possible because society exists.

"Haaah." Tanya visibly emits a little sigh and shakes her head.

Time to move.

Staying here will only mean being in the way.

"Let's head out. Shall I have Lieutenant Serebryakov drive us?"

"Of course. Sorry for the trouble, Colonel."

"Not at all, sir. I'm grateful we had a chance to talk. One moment, please."

Saying she'll get things sorted out quickly, Tanya walks toward a subordinate and addresses him.

"Major Weiss, can I borrow you for a second?"

"Yes, Colonel."

He eagerly asks what he can do for her, and Tanya swiftly gives him his orders.

"I'm taking Lieutenant Serebryakov and accompanying Colonel Lergen to the General Staff Office. Sorry to ask this, but I need you to round up the troops and wait for the trucks."

"Understood. It seems my vacation will be starting slightly earlier than yours, ma'am."

"Fine by me," Tanya answers with a laugh. "But remember, Colonel Lergen organized it. I won't demand that the troops need to restrain themselves, but don't let me hear about any of you going too crazy, either."

Weiss barks a ready "Yes, ma'am." It's a bit excessive, but this point is worth emphasizing.

"This is the rear. I'm sure you're aware, but before you dismiss the unit, remind everyone about the gag order regarding the eastern front and a general reminder to keep a tight lid on anything sensitive. It may be old news for the veterans of our battalion, but a good number of the ones who joined us partway are replacements."

We can't have anybody accidentally leaking intel. It'd cause trouble for Lergen.

While it's not as if the capital is full of Russian agents like Tokyo during the Russo-Japanese War…as long as we don't become paranoid, it's best to stay vigilant.

We're waging war against the Commies and the John Bulls.

*Ahhh.* Tanya swallows a little sigh. For a state like the Empire that has trouble keeping infiltrators out, information warfare is nothing but pain.

"I'll do what I can. And I'll pass word on to Captain Meybert and Captain Ahrens as well as Lieutenant Tospan."

"Thanks, I'm counting on you. All right, I'll say a quick word before I go."

Tanya quickly gathers the troops, addresses them briefly, and finishes making arrangements for everyone to receive their leave passes and even stipends so they can make the most of their time in the capital on their long overdue rotation from the front.

The troops are finally going to enjoy a much-anticipated vacation.

Seeing a movie wouldn't be a bad idea. I'm sure refreshments will be on the house. The General Staff provided the vouchers, after all. Lieutenant

Colonel Uger's securing special tickets to send people home in first class. It's clear they're pulling out all the stops.

All the troops have gotten their due as stipulated by military regulations. Of course, that even includes extra food in the form of wheat flour ration coupons expertly procured for the entire Kampfgruppe at the behest of Lieutenant General Zettour.

Thus, Tanya's job is simple.

The army is built upon the foundational idea that good service is rewarded and bad service is punished. In other words, she needs to apply for awards and promotions while she has the use of Colonel Lergen's name.

Aside from that, all that's left is to give the noncoms and the rank and file their real vacation.

The General Staff—including Zettour, who arranged for this return trip—is surprisingly kind to anyone who isn't a commissioned officer. It's one of the nice things about the Empire's system.

That being said, aside from that one upside, there's plenty wrong with the Empire.

*For example…* Tanya's feet practically drag as she boards the car Serebryakov has procured.

She has no choice but to appear at the General Staff Office. No ifs, ands, or buts.

On top of that, a superior officer anxiously pressing his brow is sitting directly next to her.

If my adjutant screws up just a little bit, maybe it'll be possible to postpone this meeting to a different day. Visha, I wish you could pick up on my feelings here.

"…Haaah," Tanya sighs.

"What is it, Colonel?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Good."

After that unfruitful exchange, Tanya maintains a polite silence while sitting beside the similarly mute colonel. The view out the window of the swaying car is… I guess you could call it vividly monochromatic.

Even when a faint splash of color briefly comes into view, it's painfully obvious that it's out of reach. When, oh when, do officers get to go on leave?

I want labor law reform. Badly. Right now. Then again…

I shake my head slightly.

My greatest desire, even more than unattainable labor laws, is an instrument of violence that will obliterate my problems; if possible, it would be great to ally with one that is both competent and reliable—something that can act as a meat shield to guarantee Tanya's safety.

The Council for Self-Government that Zettour set up in the east… Well, it's not as if it's a pointless venture, but…it's too bad it can't be relied on for anything besides defense in depth.

I'm not fond of being purely reactive, either. It's also worrying that the army brass and the government are at odds. Is this a salvageable situation if there's a diaper on hand?

*Haaah.* Tanya swallows another sigh.

I've never even raised a kid, but now I'm suddenly on diaper duty?

It's work, so there's no room for complaints. Based on Tanya's obligations and contract, cleaning up this mess as Zettour requested is already set in stone. I wish I could at least submit an invoice for additional compensation.

There's no room for complaints, but…wait.

Nursing care shouldn't be required here. Are the leaders at the core of the Empire in such a state that they not only need diapers but also can't even put them on themselves?

What an incredibly strange question.

## GENERAL STAFF HQ, THE OFFICE OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL RUDERSDORF

"…So even nonsense is a shock when it goes to extremes."

The office's occupant, Lieutenant General Rudersdorf, winced. To be fair, he had been doing all in his power to smile.

The result?

The poor twitching corners of his mouth said it all.

"You want to win the war, but you don't want to spend money, and you don't want to make sacrifices? That's asking too much. I need you to

compromise on at least one point."

If there had been a mirror in front of him, what a slack-jawed face he would see. The face his friend usually felt compelled to call brazen was twisted in distress. It wasn't long before agony crept into his expression, as if a doctor had just informed him he had an incurable disease.

And to top it off, there was the sound of his voice. It was a far cry from the arrogant tone he showed his subordinates. So incredibly frail.

The irony was not lost on Rudersdorf himself.

"We're at war."

*Even now.*

*Why?* he had to ask himself.

"…It's strange. If it weren't for the idiots who chose not to stop when we had the chance, this would have been over ages ago."

He had seen opportunity and hope and perhaps even a bright future. The Reich could have walked toward that light.

"But that path is closed to us… What a tragedy…"

The end he had seen… *Why?* Even Rudersdorf, renowned as an unflappable man, felt compelled to pray. *Dear God, why?*

"Regrets and prayers won't change a thing."

He couldn't stop the self-deprecating words from spilling out.

Everything—everything—had slipped through his grasp.

The possibility that should have been well within reach had disappeared long ago. All that was left now were the dregs of a dream.

*No.* There the man smiled bitterly.

"I can't give in."

*It's not over yet. It's too soon to give up. I still have the will to fight.*

*Not yet, not yet, not yet* was all he could muster. Nothing more. But even that much was impressive. So what was there for him to get discouraged about?

What he needed at this moment was an exceedingly simple method.

He needed to resolve the situation and prevent problems from cropping up. Emergency measures to treat the infection. His task was extremely straightforward.

The words that quietly fell from his lips caused Rudersdorf to question himself. The objective was to protect the Empire. That much was obvious.

But what the target should be was a murkier subject.

“It needs to be a surgical strike. Should we take aim at the part that needs it the most?”

They had no record of success when it came to eliminating the enemy field army. Delivering a surgical strike at the most crucial location meant… taking a measure that seemed unforgivable.

And yet, it was attractive.

“…I can leave the eastern front up to Zettour. He’ll be able to hold for a while. But in terms of commanding the combat units, the west is rather worrying. If I could station someone reliable out there…”

*Could we succeed?* Going beyond right and wrong, the man trained as a staff officer found himself thinking in the realm of pure possibility.

After dealing with so much politics, his mind was stiff and rusty. Oiling it with operations know-how made the gears turn faster. For someone with a thorough knowledge of troop dispositions, it was relatively easy to estimate the amount of force necessary.

In fact, he could make those calculations with peerless accuracy. With that settled, all that remained was to deploy units and use them.

“The Lergen Kampfgruppe on the outskirts of the capital. That’s! just enough. No, that’s cutting it too close. We need more. That’s the bare minimum but far from satisfactory…”

Gather the necessary playing pieces and position them as needed. Those are the basics and the building blocks for any strategy. As his thoughts turned to balancing out the forces, Rudersdorf continued making smooth progress.

Understanding which pieces are useful and how to best use them is the greatest specialty of those in the field of operations. With a traditional concentration of assets, it was easy to scrape together what was needed.

“…We do have the expeditionary army stationed on the southern continent.”

The staffers’ management style resulted in detailed knowledge of even the temperaments of the commanders. That’s what made the staff officers staff officers and why the General Staff was such an intense, exclusive, privileged group.

“Romel would be able to…”

*Probably. In fact, there’s no doubt.*

He had a record and career that inspired confidence. Most importantly, the man had more than enough motivation.

*Right…* It was there that the ethical argument finally entered Rudersdorf's mind. The emotions he had been ignoring until now were screaming their refusal.

*A surgical measure? That's unacceptable.*

"…I guess I'm finally so tired that I'm starting to become delusional."

A member of the General Staff trying to find a way to turn on the institutions of the fatherland.

If the staff officers present during the founding of the state could see what he was thinking, they would surely run a saber through him without waiting for an explanation. And it would be only natural, given their oath of loyalty and honor would be at stake. This was treason, plain and simple.

Even as a daydream, it was an unacceptable act of insubordination.

"Hmph, this is twisted even for me."

This wasn't the path of an officer. This grouped him with the likes of politicians or perhaps those damnable Communists.

"It's nothing more than a contingency plan."

He wasn't taking it seriously but merely toying with the idea as an intellectual exercise for a "true last resort."

*Yes, that's all it is.*

A weary mind sometimes comes up with absurd ideas.

The possibilities he could entertain were too tempting. The phrase *fundamental solution* danced in the back of his mind. Reason screamed at him that it was suicide, but his exhausted brain was charmed by the idea nonetheless.

He could only smile and admit he was out of moves. A lack of sleep is dangerous for the mind.

"…If only I could laugh off the things that are bothering me."

For better or worse, his spiraling thoughts were interrupted by an abrupt knock on the door. Glancing at the clock on his desk, he saw that—though a bit later than he had expected—it was time.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff is here."

Rudersdorf took a quick, deep breath to prepare his voice.

Then regaining his usual nonchalant tone, he shouted, "Send her in!"

"Right away, sir!"

After that spirited exchange, it wasn't long before two sets of footsteps approached.

After a foretelling knock, the door opened. The first thing he saw was broken eyes. For a field officer returning from the eastern front, the accompanying frame was much too small. A child with the face of a grizzled commander. This was one facet of total war.

Puffing a cigar, Rudersdorf called out to his subordinate. “It’s been a while, Colonel. Glad to see you hale and hearty.”

“Greetings, General. Have you…lost weight?”

Though it hasn’t even been that long, Tanya’s superior has clearly hollowed out considerably. He must be experiencing major exhaustion and stress.

Seeing the unflappable Lieutenant General Rudersdorf looking visibly haggard, Tanya’s first words are very poorly thought out. Regardless of whether it’s something to say to a person concerned by their appearance, it’s generally inadvisable to ask someone so obviously exhausted if they’ve lost weight.

Even the mere implication that he’s ill or unwell is going much too far.

“It’s the dining hall’s fault. I can’t bear the food.”

“So the General Staff Office’s dining hall is the same as ever?”

“Indeed, Colonel. As you know, it all tastes awful. It’s so bad I’ve a mind to go out for my meals, though I know it’s a waste of time.”

“The mud on the eastern front tastes pretty good.”

“So good that it gets a rave review from you?”

“Of course, sir. Allow me to elaborate. One mouthful is so stunning you won’t feel like eating for days.”

“If the mud is that great, the people of the Federation must be loath to share.”

“Don’t worry, sir. They’re Communists, so they’ll feed us as much as we like.” It’s fortunate to have a superior who has a sense of humor about this. “They offer so much that even the aerial mages have trouble clearing their plates. Frankly, I’m concerned we may end up overweight. Showing restraint is difficult business.”

“It’s fairly amusing to imagine Zettour coming back fat from the east.”

A light jab. A joke that leans on their mutual acquaintance. It’s so

peaceful and civilized that frankly, if we weren't at war, it would be delightfully businesslike.

Having sufficiently broken the ice, Tanya gets right to the point to avoid repeating her earlier blunder. "Blowing up Supreme Command… I heard about it unofficially…via Colonel Lergen of all people and, uh…"

Tanya has to come right out and say this so he doesn't suspect her of snitching. Feigning ignorance is just a means to get confirmation.

To avoid overtly implying anything, a careful tone is critical here. It might seem like an unnecessary hassle, but going through your superior is the most basic way of avoiding trouble in pretty much any organization. As far as I can tell, no one wreaks more havoc than the incompetent worker who fails to communicate through the proper channels.

In any case, the response Tanya gets is somewhat expected.

"Are you insinuating that *I* gave that preposterous order? *Me?*"

The senior officer is wearing a bewildered expression.

But anyone can pretend to be shocked.

Humans lie. They even do it in private and at times lie to themselves. So when necessity demands that a good worker speak falsehoods, it's only natural to be met with a parade of sincerely told lies.

An inability to catch the subtle intent in your superior's words will eventually end with crashing into a glass ceiling partway up the promotion ladder. Splattering yourself on the wall is already bad enough, but if you aren't into being scraped off with heavy-duty cleaner and put on display as an example for everyone else, then you have to use every bit of brainpower.

"It was intimated to me that such a plan existed…"

"So Colonel Lergen's learned how to tell bad jokes now? That's not very smart, but progress is progress. The winds of Ildoa and the east must have worked wonders."

"That was supposed to be a joke?! From Colonel Lergen?!"

"That's right. It makes sense that you'd be surprised… It seems that the change of pace has been good for him. We should probably recommend it to all our uptight staffers."

Regardless of whether that claim is true or not, Rudersdorf is trying to laugh it off. This uncertainty is scary. But it's much better than having it confirmed with a straight face.

Things are always better when you can still laugh.

“If it’s that effective, I’d like to go to Ildoa myself. But when I spoke with an Ildoan on the eastern front, he didn’t seem to have such a splendid sense of humor.”

“He was probably afraid of cracking jokes with an officer as deadly serious as you. Our allies are apparently quite well-mannered.”

Tanya responds with an amused laugh. “What a surprise. I never thought I’d hear you joke like that, General.”

Ildoa, well-mannered? Is that before or after factoring in the way they claim to be our friends?

Mutual understanding is a big step toward compromise. Truly, how blessed we are to have a mediator like Ildoa!

“That’s one way to share your opinion. Anything else, Colonel?”

His question comes in the guise of banter with a somewhat jocular tone. It should be safe to air out my main concern.

“Does that mean I can laugh off Colonel Lergen’s comments as nonsense?”

“Of course. Even if I were going to give you a crazy order, it’s not the right time—not yet at least. To be clear, the General Staff isn’t ordering anything of the sort.”

“He really pulled a fast one on me, then. It appears I’ve been careless…” Tanya smiles awkwardly in apparent introspection, keeping a close watch on Rudersdorf’s expression all the while.

Problematically, he has denied it, but it’s not a *clear* denial.

After all, he said “not yet.”

Tanya briefly considers Rudersdorf’s comment. He’s smiling, and he sounds like he’s kidding around, but it’s awfully significant that he didn’t immediately deny the idea.

As a lieutenant general, he should always be clear and resolute. And yet… he’s being vague.

Even a monkey would understand the part he’s not saying. Anybody with a brain could read between the lines here. This is a classic technique for absolving oneself from responsibility while still relaying the all-important intent.

It’s not a denial. It’s a refusal to give a straight answer masquerading as a denial. This pillar of the General Staff, the very general in charge of leading all high-level planning as deputy director of Operations, might as well have

openly declared that he doesn't approve of how the people he answers to are handling things.

That's more than enough evidence of the current discord. A slick of cold sweat coats Tanya's back.

This is horrible.

"Now then, that's enough catching up. Good work out there in the thick of the east. I expect to hear your candid opinion of our situation as someone who recently spent time on the front lines."

"Yes, sir. I'm honored. But we haven't heard what the plan for the east is following Operation Andromeda. I'd appreciate it if you could detail what our strategy will be going forward."

"Don't sugarcoat it, Colonel. I know you're critical of current policy. You probably want to say the major offensive was a huge failure. Am I wrong?"

Even Tanya is forced to spit it out when confronted so openly.

"Well, superficially, we managed to tidy up the lines…though as you point out, it was quite a disaster. As you might imagine, our only real choice is to pull back, lean on the Council for Self-Government for fighting power, and then do everything we can to secure long-term advantages."

"Wait."

A short but firm interjection.

The man speaking waves his hands in dismay.

"I'm not Zettour." Exhaling cigar smoke, Rudersdorf shrugs with good grace and gives Tanya a domineering glare. "You're free to state your opinion—I welcome it. But I'm not partial to lengthy arguments."

He taps his fingers on the table and pins her down with his gaze. It's not a comforting glance, though, and he's making it clear there is no room for discussion on that matter.

"I don't want to endlessly debate about premises that don't exist." He knocks the table again to emphasize his objection to futilely expending time and effort. "We needn't overexert ourselves, but neither should we waste time. Your conclusion. Give me your conclusion first."

"General, I'm just a magic lieutenant colonel. Though I've been through staff training, I'm hardly a member of the General Staff. I've served in the field for so long that in this sort of case…"

"You can give me your conclusion, or you can leave. Your choice."

It's a blunt response.

Faced with such strong will and rock-solid words, I give up on being roundabout.

I wanted some plausible deniability, but if the insurance plan costs too much, there's no choice but to brace myself and take the leap. From the beginning, Tanya never had the option to be evasive.

"Then I'll take advantage of your kindness."

"Go on."

"What is the objective being asked of us? What is the strategic objective that will allow us to reach our goal of security, the objective the Empire should pursue in this war?"

The general snorts.

"Victory."

The muttered word inspires confusion. *Victory?* Even if we're being generous, surely that's the *result* of the objective. It doesn't actually answer the question of what our strategic objective is.

"General?"

"I'm telling you it's victory. Don't you understand, Colonel?"

Repeating it doesn't change anything. It's aggravating to admit, but I have literally no idea what he's getting at.

Victory is only ever an *outcome*. Certainly, it can be considered a wonderful *achievement*. Tanya has no reason to not love victory as much as the next soldier. And it's only natural that the army would pursue the desirable outcome of victory in war.

But what should be pursued *in pursuit* of that wonderful achievement? That's the key.

The same goes for any corporation. It could be new contracts, profit margin, or even the number of business cards received—it doesn't really matter what specifically, but there are goals and standards all employees should strive to meet.

The Empire is no exception. First comes the *objective*. You set a goal to pursue the objective, and everyone acts in concert to achieve victory.

How can an organization act if it doesn't know what its objectives or goals are?

"What kind of victory does the government want us to win? I'm ashamed to ask, but how are we defining victory?"

"How many times do I have to repeat myself, Colonel? The victory

required of us is *victory*. Nothing more, nothing less."

The general is practically scoffing as he says the nature of victory is self-evident, and I can't detect any hint of deception or doublespeak.

What is that supposed to mean? Really, what the hell is going on?

This is incredibly unsettling, and through sheer willpower, I manage to pose a single question. Please tell me I'm wrong…

"General, do you mean the army is only being ordered to achieve victory…?"

"That is correct."

"…I……see."

That was exactly what I didn't want to hear.

Who cares how absurd the goal might be? If the Empire and its government would just indicate that we're working toward a goal that had been set to attain the state's overarching objectives, then it would be fine even if it entailed something ludicrous like "mass-produce socks" or "destroy the Federation."

But what do we get instead? Supreme Command has ordered General Rudersdorf to simply achieve victory.

Nothing more, nothing less.

His only duty is victory…? Impossible. Tanya's expression twists up as roiling emotions come out in a shout.

"But that's absurd."

"That is correct."

It's a given that everyone desires a future that contains victory. Winning is the ultimate panacea, after all.

But even the best medicine is created to cure a certain disease. If silver bullets exist, how could there possibly be no worthy targets?

When you think about it, everything becomes crystal clear.

It simply can't be true.

Ever since setting foot back in the capital, Tanya's self-restraint has been tested time and time again, but this is the limit. The next words out of her mouth are a scream.

"D-does this mean that Supreme Command hasn't set any strategic objectives at all?!"

"That is correct."

This isn't normal. Are their brains functioning?

Where has raison d'état gone?

The shock is so great that Tanya's ability to maintain appearances goes out the window; every emotion is plain to see on her face as she casts her gaze to the ceiling. Even if the Federation Army burst through the door to attack at this moment, it wouldn't be as shocking as this discovery.

The entire state of affairs is unthinkable. There's no other way to describe our current situation.

It's like being informed that the crew has vanished from the cockpit mid-flight. No, it's more like getting an in-flight announcement that the cockpit itself has vanished.

"…General, is the situation in the capital that complicated and impenetrable? I just can't understand the reasoning."

"You're probably tired of hearing this, but that is correct. Colonel, public opinion in the capital has become a monster."

His reply nearly makes Tanya appeal to the heavens.

The story goes that in the past a Japanese politician decided the situation in Europe was too complicated and mysterious and promptly quit his job. Boy, am I jealous that he had that option. How wonderful it would be if I could run like the wind away from here.

If this is how it is, then what was the point of all the suffering the Empire, the Imperial Army, and I personally endured? Why have we been placing so much emphasis on work ethic? I almost want to scream.

As if that isn't bad enough, the food situation is appalling, and we have no time and nowhere to spend our salary, which means we're doing work above our pay grade, we're undersupplied, and we're experiencing unprecedented inflation all at once!

Given my understanding of the social contract, this is undoubtedly a complete failure to deliver the people's due.

Whatever numbskull is responsible should be terminated. Immediately and with great prejudice.

"Suddenly…I feel like an explosive accident might just be a great idea."

"Problematically, it's quite tempting."

The slightly relaxed expression that creeps onto the general's face as he chuckles is horrifying.

This is funny? This is what gets a laugh out of you? There's little doubt we're awfully close to the boiling point.

“Let’s review the Empire’s current situation… I suppose we can say it’s suffering a terminal illness in the prime of its life. Unfortunately, no one but the doctor—perhaps not even the patient itself—has any idea how much life it has left.”

“There’s no way to nurse it back to health?”

“…If the Federation were out of the picture, then maybe a land war…”

It almost sounds like he’s saying we would have a chance.

Given that the greatest threat the Empire is facing currently lies in the east, that makes sense. Of course, the dogged persistence of the Federation is what has us in so much agony.

So we’re supposed to just imagine what life would be like if we could magically have ideal conditions?

There’s a major issue.

“Do you think the *Kranke* can take it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

It’s painfully obvious that Tanya’s confused face makes her look like her brain is missing. But anybody would be confused. The general has morphed into an entity that is totally unpredictable.

This is a deviation from the Rudersdorf of recent memory.

Everyone has a general idea of what their superiors are like, and the man before me has taken a major departure from how I normally envision him.

“I said I don’t know. I can’t be sure it’s impossible, but there isn’t any guarantee that it’s possible, either.”

“General, then as the army…”

“We’re an army that is expected to be capable of winning even without a definition of victory. In light of that, we should be able to handle even the toughest problems. Don’t you agree, Colonel?”

Should I submit him for psychological evaluation? Rudersdorf is so strange today that a pointless thought crosses my mind.

He’s desperate.

It’s a possibility I wish I could dismiss immediately, but when he makes such sarcastic comments, it’s hard to not feel depressed.

“General, I’d like to hear your own thoughts…”

The lieutenant general responds with a courteous nod. “Our only option in the east is to contract and consolidate. The same goes for the west. All in all,

we're headed downhill."

He abruptly presents his analysis of the current situation. It's awful to hear, but that's just the reality of what the Empire is facing. At least it's clear my superior grasps the gravity of the challenge before us.

"Doing something about this mess is my job. I guess I'll start by purging the *Kranke* as needed… Though it's not even clear what needs to be removed or how."

*Purge* is an incredibly dangerous word. What is he implying?

Unfortunately, interrupting now would be like poking a sleeping dog.

As the general answers his own questions mockingly, Tanya smiles in uncertain silence, as is the social norm. Being polite is ultimately about personal safety.

"I've whined too much, Colonel."

"No, I feel I've glimpsed a fraction of the weight you are forced to bear, sir. My respect for you and your burden has only grown."

This formal exchange needs to be observed thoroughly from start to finish. In an utterly natural manner, Tanya performs a bow as if in awe of him.

"How very thoughtful of you. I'm sure you could make it as a bureaucrat in the capital. I don't mean that as an insult, mind you."

"Thank you, sir—I've noted the army's opinion of bureaucrats in general."

""Ha-ha-ha."" Two sets of hearty laughs echo throughout the room.

A mutual enemy is a powerful tool for bringing people together. Handled appropriately, this shared hatred of bureaucracy can make for excellent social lubricant.

"Well, we can't chat all day. Your unit will be reorganized under Colonel Lergen…is what the official records will say. In reality, it's up to you."

"Yes, sir."

"As part of your leave, the Kampfgruppe's artillery and infantry components will be stationed in a port city. When the time is right, Colonel Lergen will be formally transferred back to the General Staff."

"A promotion."

Man, even in these trying times, the colonel with strong ties to Central nets another sweet deal? Not only has he accumulated human capital, but also he's blessed with social capital as well.

“That’s right. As for the armored and mage units, we’ll have them reorganize on the outskirts of the capital.”

“Any hope for replacement mages?”

“Don’t expect any.”

“…Understood.”

Not that I anticipated a different reaction. There was a faint hope, but as expected, it’s not happening.

“We’ve been dealing with a chronic shortage of mages fit for the front lines for some time now. I’ll be straight with you. We’re already doing you a favor by not pulling any from your unit.”

“With the knowledge that I’m being presumptuous, my Kampfgruppe, to say nothing of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, is a quick-reaction force equipped with the Type 97 computation orb at its core. If I could humbly request special consideration in order to maintain and develop our force…”

“Don’t push your luck, Colonel. We’re at our limits.”

“…Yes, sir.”

So we’re out of recruits of even First Lieutenant Wüstemann’s caliber? Apparently, even insisting isn’t going to produce results. Mage units are overly reliant on individual resourcefulness and ability. In a total war where massive losses are a given, finding capable replacements is a herculean challenge.

The fact that we’re basically out of mages who can operate a Type 97 is a chilling thought. *Hah.* Tanya suppresses a sigh. Apparently, experienced aerial mages, Tanya included, are a precious commodity now. Going forward, we’ll be used with ever greater care while being worked to the bone till we’re ground to dust.

Man, I really miss the labor standards guys. Back in the day, I admit that I thought they were just naggy and obnoxious, but what I wouldn’t give to see them now.

“Thanks for coming. I’m sure I’ll be hearing from you again at some point. Until then, discuss the details with Colonel Lergen.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be going, then.”

When Tanya exits the office, she finds Colonel Lergen has been waiting for

her.

“Colonel, do you have a moment?” he asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s take a little walk.”

The way he sets off without waiting for her response indicates that he fully expects her to follow as a matter of course. That’s slightly insulting, but — Well, considering the gap in their ranks and her position, Tanya has no choice but to go with him.

Luckily, Lergen isn’t so far gone that he fails to be considerate about the difference of their strides and thoughtfully matches her pace.

Naturally, he must want to talk about something.

As expected, he feigns casual conversation while launching into his main purpose.

“…I assume you heard it with your own ears, Colonel.”

“Very unfavorable.”

“Indeed.”

With a pained wince, the esteemed colonel continues.

“This is the general state of things everywhere.”

“It’s hard to believe.”

“You should familiarize yourself with public opinion, Colonel Degurechaff. I’ve been in the capital for a long time. Even so, I’m constantly astonished at how much the army’s estimation of things differs from everyone else. To you, it might sound like they’re coming from another world.”

He probably hadn’t given the remark much thought. But to Tanya, someone literally from another world, it’s quite thought-provoking.

“Oh dear, I’ll be talking to beings from another world, huh?”

It makes sense that the implication is lost on him. For a moment, it almost makes perfect sense.

With a complete breakdown in common language, perhaps creating another world is surprisingly simple.

“Haaah.” Another little sigh slips out.

“I wonder what language I should speak in.”

“The language of the Reich should work, no?”

“Ah, of course.”

Speaking the Reich’s language in another world.

Wow… I'm deliberating on what language from another world I should use to speak to people from another world in another world.

Am I having a stroke?

Maintaining my sanity is probably only going to get harder from here on out. If it weren't for that damned Being X, this never would have happened.

I'm definitely going to make that bastard pay.

[ chapter ]

# II

## The Home Front

**Clouds are both the greatest of allies and the worst of betrayers.**

**From a flight diary of the Commonwealth 210th Pathfinder Squadron**



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# [chapter] II The Home Front

## JUNE 30, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL AIR CONTROL IN THE WEST

Interception Control was originally established as a very limited provisional role within the Imperial Army—a sort of task force made up of aerial mages and other air assets dedicated to interdicting enemy air attack. To put it plainly, interception controllers were people who specialized in air defense. The rationale for this command's formation was simple.

The air battles over the Rhine front were fierce. It was natural to desire a unit dedicated to conducting rapid response missions when the enemy was so close that every second counted. In particular, the few Republican units that conducted recon-in-force missions needed to be dealt with urgently whenever they took to the skies.

Thus, to lessen the burden on the overworked Rhine Control, it was decided that a post specializing in interception missions would be set up along a separate chain of command. That was their only purpose and reason for being. Once the challenges of the extreme close quarters of trench fighting could be resolved, then their job was done…or at least, that was how it was supposed to play out.

Their disbanding was put off time after time, until the Air Battle of the West broke out.

From then on, former Rhine Control became full-time supporters of the raging air war and maintaining air supremacy over the former Republic became the jurisdiction of the provisional interception controllers.

But at that stage, Air Control and Interception Control were two different things within Rhine Control. If nothing else, there's little doubt that the two

groups held themselves apart. Air Control was the main force, and Interception Control chipped in to help deal with the occasional incursion of the enemy's long-distance reconnaissance aircraft.

Once things in the west settled down, everything would revert to the purview of Air Control… Little did they know how that would change.

The future they took for granted was nothing but a dream.

Currently, the former Rhine Control, now dubbed Western Air Control, was specialized in air defense and interception.

In addition to this strange reversal, the small and supposedly still provisional special forces group ended up needing navigation support from Air Control when they entered enemy territory.

They had been forced to shift from offense to defense. That perfectly described the situation the entire Empire was facing. And nothing demonstrated the Imperial Army's predicament quite as eloquently as the glum faces of the interception controllers in the control room.

Some might say there was an excess supply of sighs. In the Empire, beset by chronic lack of production capacity to meet demand, irritated, miserable grumbles were the sole exception and available in massive quantities.

"It's the guys on their regular flight. They refuse to learn their lesson and are back for more."

"They're going all in tonight… They've split into three groups, on course for a raid on the lowland industrial zone."

The personnel on duty swiftly gauged the enemy's apparent intentions, and the commander made the call as usual. It was time for war.

Another night of fighting had just begun.

"Issue the warning. It's an interception battle, ladies and gentlemen. You know what you're doing. I want to see the usual results."

*You know what you're doing.*

The fact that the duty officer said it as encouragement, without a hint of sarcasm, painted a vivid description of the Empire's circumstances.

**THE SAME DAY, ABOVE THE ROUTE TO THE LOWLAND INDUSTRIAL ZONE ON THE FORMER RHINE FRONT**

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth bomber crews had surprisingly little idea what they were doing.

To most pilots, apart from the pathfinders, bombing raids were unfamiliar territory.

The reason for that was exceedingly simple—the average life span of a Commonwealth bomber was *fifty to sixty flight hours*.

There was no way anyone would enthusiastically volunteer for these missions if plane after plane came limping back home full of holes, while the crew inside was lucky to still be alive.

They called them "bombing runs into hell."

Whether they ended up dropping bombs or themselves into hell was a total coin toss. One stroke of bad luck was enough to invite the god of death.

And this day was going to be a trial more than a match for any one of those shitty, cursed days.

The cause of their misfortune was incredibly straightforward.

Clouds.

The veil of night that should have been covering hell was lacking. The first to realize were the veterans, who were used to bad luck.

One of them, the captain of the pathfinder bomber leading the formation, gnashed his teeth as he grumbled in anxiety. "…They're not canceling the mission?! This is nowhere near enough cloud cover!"

The night sky.

A pitch-black sky.

The surface below was completely dark, most likely because of a strict blackout order, but it was obvious that it wasn't hidden behind a thick wall of clouds. It was fine that they could see their targets, but when you stare into the abyss, it tends to stare back at you.

"What the hell did the weather specialists mean by 'perfect conditions'? Perfect conditions to be intercepted?! Were they knocking back aquavit or something? Those idiots probably just said whatever popped into their liquor-addled minds first!" he spat and, with a deep foreboding, scanned the terrain.

What he spotted was red. The sudden appearance of a violent, blinding beam.

"A searchlight!"

"Shit! We're totally visible!"

"Night fighters, high!"

At the shriek from the flight engineer, the captain tried to push the control stick to evade but lost consciousness before he had a chance.

The cause was a 20 mm autocannon shell fired from above by an enemy fighter. The modernized grim reaper's scythe didn't even allow the captain time for his life to flash before his eyes. He was gone in an instant. The god of death was so efficient in this day and age.

At the same time the brains of the man who had been the captain splattered the plane's interior, his crew was meeting with a similar fate. The pathfinder—now unsteady, aimless, and out of control—was unable to maintain its flight position and was pulled to the ground as gravity's prisoner.

Meanwhile, the planes behind it in the formation had a sickeningly good view of the carnage. Or rather, they were unfortunate enough to see it unfold in great detail. After all, the imperial searchlight had been kind enough to illuminate the whole scene.

That was when the following bomber's crew screamed.

"Pathfinder went down! Aw, hell!"

There weren't enough clouds. They were hopelessly naked in death alley.

And the enemy night fighters were descending on them like fish eager for bait. Irritatingly for the bombers maintaining formation, the enemy was in prime night-fighting form.

These troublesome visitors came not just from above but below as well.

"Flak's directly beneath us! The ground's opening up!"

With their targets lit by searchlight, a storm of anti–air fire was going up. And on top of that, the illuminated planes made great targets for the zooming fighters.

Get lit up for one minute, and your life span gets cut in half.

Get lit up for two, and you thank God if you survive.

Each and every moment spent in that sky grated on the soul. It might as well have been an eternity of torment. *Now? Not yet? Haven't we reached the release point yet?*

That's what it meant to be a member of a Commonwealth bomber crew. All of them knew what they were in for, but it was still absolute torture.

"Prepare to release! Sync up!"

With the pathfinder gone, the commander set the target at his own discretion.

"Now!"

The bombs simultaneously released were, to the bomber crews, excess luggage. Once the heavy load was dropped on the imperial side, their task was done. There was not even the slightest reason for the now much lighter bombers to linger over the furiously firing enemy anti–air positions. One plane after another banked around and hurried to withdraw from imperial airspace, where danger prowled for prey to follow home.

But while they were on their way…

"They're coming after us! Damn it! We're taking fire!"

They were still far from friendly territory beyond the Dodobird Strait.

## JULY 1, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL ARMY WESTERN AIR CONTROL COMMAND

There's a very basic saying about war that goes: "If one side is hurting, it's no walk in the park for the other side, either."

The Imperial Army was continuously, resolutely repelling the Commonwealth's strategic bombings. But these were far from sweet victories. They were extremely familiar with how bitter winning could be.

When dawn broke after the long night, the duty officers reluctantly faced one another to address reality with scowls on their faces.

Why would this day be any different from the ones that had come before it?

"Damage report?" the commander asked.

The tense atmosphere weighed on the soldier reporting in as much as the waiting commander's gaze did.

"Within acceptable limits."

The officers reviewing the aftermath of the attack sighed in relief. It was the way everyone at Western HQ wanted every morning to start.

Negligible damage.

No one dared ask for more. They had all given up on wishing for an end to bombers long ago.

"The perimeter defenses suffered limited damage… I daresay the decoy anti–air positions are working as intended. But I doubt we can keep relying

on the same trick forever."

"One group didn't fall for it and actually reached the industrial area. Luckily, a division of the air fleet noticed and drove them off. Damage there is also limited."

"Overall, we were able to bloody the enemy. Nevertheless, there's a good chance they will be able to continue offensive operations."

They had just weathered a night-bombing mission that fielded more heavy bombers than the imperial air fleet could dream of. Early on in the war, they were able to completely shut out the Commonwealth bomber force, but at some point, enemy numbers had grown to the point where they were consistently getting through.

Of course, it wasn't as if their imperial hosts had been twiddling their thumbs, either. But they simply couldn't keep up. They couldn't eliminate every threat.

Through their sighs, everyone just kept wondering if they would be able to even maintain the status quo.

"Get started on repairs, distributing aid, and caring for the victims."

The commander's words represented nothing less than their solemn duty. After countless days of bombings, the officers in the west had already fallen into a routine.

Of course, when the nightly raids first started, it wore on their nerves. Now, though, they were all too familiar.

At least for the officers, it had become a normal part of the day.

Even so, their sage minds turned toward the future at times.

No one ever loudly proclaimed what everyone must have been thinking. Even imperial officers thought twice about cheerfully discussing their grim prospects.

But when their minds naturally wandered…sometimes quiet comments slipped out.

"…Right now, we're doing a decent job of handling the bombers. But we can't keep that up forever. At this rate, sooner or later…" one officer murmured in fear.

Pessimism is the greatest taboo there is for a soldier. Usually, they would laugh such dire thoughts off, encouraging one another or complaining playfully.

Would the fighting only grow fiercer?

Even these disciplined officers didn't have the strength to laugh these worries off as pessimism. Most of them harbored the same fear.

The same worry.

The same terror.

The same foreboding.

Their training and orders were all that had kept them from sinking into defeatism. Once one anxious comment slipped out, more followed it like a dam had burst.

"The eastern front took too many of our fighter units."

"And mages. It's always, *The eastern front needs this; the eastern front needs that!* What about the rest of us?"

Unproductive griping.

They all recognized it for what it was. But their discontent had been building for so long that the officers had to get them out now that an opportunity presented itself.

"And the new replacement pilots that we do get have flight hours way below prewar standards. Some of them are in the double digits!"

"Seriously? I thought they were still flying a minimum of a hundred and fifty before their first deployment."

"In the latest accelerated batch, it's rare to find anyone who's hit three digits."

*That's hard to believe.* The room's attention focused on the air liaison officer. Before the war, anyone with only a hundred hours wouldn't even be out of training yet.

They were supposed to have at least three hundred under their belts. Six hundred, if possible.

To any officer blessed with the fortune to have been trained according to the strict prewar standards, that was the baseline they lived by.

It was only natural that they found the current situation deeply unsettling.

"Unbelievable. So we're just going to run our promising pilots and young mages into the ground?"

"What choice do we have? All the aerial mage units that were halfway decent in the field got pulled to replace all the losses in the east…"

"So, in the end, it really is all about the eastern front, huh? That place is a quagmire."

Central Command sucked up tons of matériel and injected it into the

eastern front. Hearing that even the ammunition manufactured in the occupied territories was being sent to sustain the battle of attrition in the east was enough to make anyone sick.

They could scream that they didn't have nearly enough anti–air shells, but the home country still requisitioned it all *because they're needed in the east*. Normally, there would be more than enough soldiers to crew the air defenses, but even manpower was in short supply.

There just wasn't enough. There wasn't enough of anything.

The reason was the east. The Empire was hemorrhaging on that front.

"We let them keep believing that it's all quiet in the west. People back home clearly have no idea what it's like out here."

What interrupts the storm of complaints is their superior officer clearing his throat in exasperation.

"That's enough grumbling for one day."

Given a warning look that says they've gone too far, officers who can decipher even the subtle wavelengths of a CRT aren't about to misread it.

Any further comments wouldn't be forgiven. It was a firm statement that there was a line they weren't allowed to cross.

And so they all raced to be first to return to their work, allowing the practically mutinous atmosphere to vanish without a trace.

Of course, the commander who told them to cut it out shared their feelings on the matter. Even if was only a private thought, anyone in charge of air defense couldn't help but feel it keenly.

"…Things are going downhill, huh?"

The removed core.

The mounting strain of endless battles.

And replacements who were disappointing in both quality and quantity.

Just as he had been practically ripping his hair out, word came that a large batch of replacements was on its way, so he held out hope for a time. But when they finally arrived, it turned out they were graduates of the accelerated training program thrown straight onto a battlefield they were wholly unprepared for. It was a desperate measure the Empire never should've resorted to doing.

In front of the others, the commander maintained composure as if nothing was wrong. But internally he wanted to groan.

They had given the Commonwealth bomber groups another good

thrashing. Considering the fortunate lack of cloud cover, they could probably expect quite a score from last night.

The ratio of losses was definitely within the acceptable range. Their first gold star in some time.

But that only meant they had succeeded at fending off the enemy.

"This is suffering."

There was little doubt they would have to fight against tomorrow. Would the Empire manage to emerge victorious yet again from the Battle of the West's next engagement? It was possible the enemy would come again the day after that as well. There was no reason to think the Empire couldn't win that day as well.

But what about next month? And the month after that? In half a year? The next whole year even?

Could they really continue sustaining this rate of attrition?

"…Absolute suffering."

## THE SAME DAY, IMPERIAL CAPITAL, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

*Shore up command personnel in the west.* The Imperial Army had been aware of the need for quite a while. Yet, it was merely one among many other minor issues that had long been left unresolved.

The reason was simple.

There weren't enough people to go around.

To go a step further, unrealistic expectations had led to the current predicament. The prewar estimates had been proven inaccurate, and there were not enough staff officers.

For a decisive battle, commanding a field army did require concentrated commitment of human resources, but the necessary head count was limited. Taking this into account, the Empire cultivated its staffers through a strict selection process and targeted investment.

Only the most promising officers who passed initial screening were sent to the war college and put through staff training. The officer pool was already a selective group, so this system of choosing only the very best was overly

exacting.

The policy that was absolutely the correct answer during peacetime was completely insufficient in wartime.

In a situation like the one on the Rhine front, where the army found itself unable to extricate itself from bitter trench warfare, it was unfeasible to yank officers out just to send them off to war college. And in a situation like the east's, with its mobile fronts and fluid defensive lines, it would be difficult to pull an officer, who would have detailed knowledge of the theater of operations, without leaving forces in disarray.

On top of that, there was a limit to how much training for staffers could be accelerated. For all these reasons, the existing staff officers were terribly overworked.

They were thankful to have even injured officers stationed in the rear helping out.

For staff officers who could move freely, there was no such thing as time to rest. Most of them were being worked like rented mules.

They were considered staff officers first and human beings second, but they were still only human.

On top of everything else, there was the chronic lack of hands.

Being ordered to send away personnel under these circumstances was a chilling demand. Even the imperial-style staff didn't have it in them to enthusiastically meet this request.

But their hesitation ended there.

If the head of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Rudersdorf, was personally taking the lead, the staffers would voice their complaints to God and reluctantly get their asses in gear.

They were all gathered in a meeting room.

Fewer than ten in number, they gazed with trepidation at the chairman of the meeting, Rudersdorf himself.

To one of the attendees, Colonel Lergen, it made perfect sense.

Overall, the staffers were exhausted. The same staffers whose outstanding endurance had been acknowledged after their minds and bodies were pushed to extremes over the course of their intense military education!

*We can't possibly spare anyone else.* The words seemed to be rising in the throats of everyone present.

But as Lergen watched, the leader of the meeting broached the topic with

a straight face.

"As I suspected, we do need to send someone west."

The general indicated that would be the meat of their discussion. Realizing they would be entertaining the possibility of someone being dispatched, even the most reserved staffers felt compelled to voice their objections.

The officer sitting next to Lergen went pale and quickly thrust a hand into the air, requesting permission to speak.

"General, with all due respect, I don't think there are any major issues with the west's personnel…"

"It needs to be better. We're sending someone. The only question left is who."

The staffer had tried to say, *We don't want to send anyone*, in a roundabout way but was completely routed by Rudersdorf's flat reply.

*So we have no choice?* Lergen braced himself.

*We* have *to send someone. That's what the higher-ups want.*

"There are very few people who can comprehend the General Staff's will fast enough to act on it immediately. And the quagmire out west is a battle of attrition. Even a slight improvement could prove decisive down the line."

When he scanned the room, they all shuddered.

"That's why we're going to do this right. It's time to give the western front some proper attention. Got it?"

When he asked for confirmation, most of the staffers averted their eyes. Though Lergen was just barely able to meet the general's intense gaze, he preferred not to answer.

But for better or worse, Lergen was also a staff officer.

He searched his mind for an appropriate person and promptly proposed a candidate.

"What about General Rosenberg? Before returning to the service, he was a member of parliament. He's well versed in the relationship between the government and the military, and he's a baron."

Rosenberg was a military government official in Dacia. The high-ranking general was not only on relatively good terms with the imperial family, but he also got on decently well with the civilian government, too. The man came with a wealth of political experience.

"The military administration in Dacia is our oil lifeline. I don't want to

think about what would happen if we moved him."

His first choice having been shot down, Lergen suggested his second pick.

"How about Lieutenant Colonel Schulz? He joined around the same time as me. Given the long recuperation from his illness, it's an open question whether he's fit for line duty, but his handling of critical matters in the rear has been outstanding. If I remember correctly, he's dealing with military-civil affairs."

"That's a good choice. If only we could have him. It hasn't been made official yet, but that idiot Zettour is taking him to the east."

"He's been pulled, sir?"

Rudersdorf grunted yes with a bitter nod.

"His transfer will be announced at the next general meeting for personnel assignments. He'll be posted as an advisor to the Council for Self-Government—an appointment that acknowledges his coordination skills. I can understand it from a division planning perspective, but an agreeable, skilled staffer is so rare…"

That meant Lergen's second choice was also no good. But the General Staff should have been capable of unilaterally moving mid-ranking personnel.

If necessary, they had the option of stealing him.

"Shall we divert Schulz from there?"

"No. We can't let the planning of the voluntary division fail."

Given the obvious importance of the east, the west simply had to be lower priority. At this point, very few viable candidates remained. There were many capable staffers despite the shortage, but there were hardly any who could be relied on for something besides operations.

*Oh.* There Lergen recalled a certain exceptional railroad man. Excellent coordination skills. An ideal in both personality and character.

"What about Lieutenant Colonel Uger? A good, talented man. I think he meets the bar."

"…We've been working him too hard. He's also not aggressive enough. If he were a brigadier general or had experience commanding a regiment on the front lines, it might be a different story…"

*Career matters, hmm?* And then someone came to Lergen's mind.

There was a candidate who had the perfect experience for the job, if nothing else.

"Then what about me, sir? I have combat experience, if only on paper. I'm also not a general, but if you take my service experience into account—"

As he was about to mention the suitable presence he exuded, Rudersdorf interrupted. "It's folly enough to use your house as firewood during a total war, but we're not so pressed that we need to burn our arms and legs, too."

"Thank you, sir."

"I have more than enough work for you, Colonel. Anyone else you can think of?"

Before he even had time to jokingly ask for a reprieve, he was ordered to name his next suggestion.

*At this point, I guess I'll think strictly in terms of military careers.* Lergen mulled over his options. Someone who was available and capable of following through on the General Staff's intentions…

*What about him?*

"What do you think of General Romel? If we assigned him to the west following a short stay with the General Staff after the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps gets recalled, I think we could fill him in on the situation."

"…He *will* have his hands free."

"Yes, sir. Once he's back, he surely will be. A command in the west might even be a bit of a vacation for him. Personnel-wise, he's a very convenient choice."

"But he's an outstanding tactical commander. That ability would go to waste if we posted him there. And he doesn't have much experience with the intersection between civilian and military matters. We could educate him, but is there a chance that will end up watering down his talents?"

"In that case…" Lergen quickly revised his proposal. If one wasn't good enough, then two would do. "How about sending Lieutenant Colonel Uger along to assist?"

"That's out of the question." Rudersdorf shook his head. "I'm not sending more than one. Usable staffers are already too scarce."

Unbeknownst to Lergen at the time his plan was getting shot down, Uger was prized for his negotiating ability.

Being able to coax needed supplies out of someone who persistently grumbled, complained, and even made outright nasty remarks—that had never been valued in staff officers.

As a result, the sky was the limit when it came to demand for people who could make a compromise.

Any attempt to put "the railroad guy who negotiates so politely" with civilians in the rear would elicit objections that spared no thought for appearances.

"Haaah." There, Rudersdorf openly emitted a sigh. "A sudden increase in divisions, replacing the dead, and to top it off, the General Staff has to cough up people for military administration. Even Zettour was tapped by Supreme Command and shipped off to the east." Sighing again in irritation, he continued, "Meeting staffing requirements on paper and actually finding people who can do the job are two very different things."

It was a valid complaint. Probably all the staff gathered in that meeting room would agree. They could only cradle their heads in their hands after his pointed remark.

"We don't have enough people. Yet, we must send someone."

"…I'm sure you're aware how difficult it is."

"At any rate, choose someone. We can't neglect the west too much. If we don't keep someone with combat experience in the rear, we risk not absorbing the lessons of the western and eastern fronts equally."

## THE SAME DAY, THE EASTERN FRONT

When the one in charge in the home country is sick to their stomach, the one in charge in the field probably feels equally sick—*Why can't you give us more soldiers?*

Even in the Imperial Army, this was an inescapable truth.

Lieutenant General Zettour, too, in his advisory role on the eastern front, smothered his distress beneath an iron mask and smoked one of his precious few remaining cigarettes with a blank face.

"…And the multinational unit?"

"They're keeping the pressure on the Hofen salient. The 301st Division is putting up a tough fight, but they may not be able to hold out for long."

Staring at the map spread out before them, Zettour fell silent for a time.

Forces stretched thin. Limited reserves. That was the situation they were currently facing.

…In theory, they had the massive Eastern Army Group at their disposal, but the attrition rate was brutal.

The only strategic reserves left were one armored division, one mechanized division, and one aerial mage battalion. Besides that, there were only a few depleted infantry divisions.

For an entire army group's strategic reserves, it was incredibly threadbare.

The textbook move would be to immediately order a general retreat to reorganize and replace their losses. Back when he was a supervisor at the war college, Zettour would have taught exactly how to best conduct the withdrawal. The problem now was that even if they pulled back, there wouldn't be any replacements waiting for them, much less reinforcements.

"How about deploying the aerial mage battalion from the strategic reserves? We can't afford to lose the Hofen salient if we want to still try to successfully complete the objective of annihilating the enemy army…"

"Let's not."

"General?"

Zettour scoffed at the puzzled officers, though he was ostensibly smiling. "Do you really intend to revisit the classic dilemma of debating whether key terrain or flexibility of strategic reserves is more important?"

He recalled his years at war college and how genuinely fun it had been.

Carrying out his duty to the imperial family and the fatherland while shouldering the fate of the troops was quite taxing. Recently, he had begun finding the weight difficult to bear. Had he grown old? His shoulders certainly felt sore.

"Can you say for sure that we absolutely must hold that position? Are you capable of making that call? Think about it. Even if it would be useful in theory, do we have the manpower to exploit it?"

Time, space, and strategic reserves.

An officer must always be calculating.

"If I may, General."

"What is it? I always welcome an opinion."

"With all due respect, it sounds as if you're suggesting that withdrawing troops is an option."

Condemnation masquerading as confirmation. *I see—from a textbook*

*point of view, it makes sense that removing troops from a salient, a key offensive position, is worthy of criticism.*

But Zettour smiled.

"…If it 'sounds' like that to an operations staff officer, then the Eastern Army Group must truly be in a tight spot."

"Well, that's…!"

These fellows were far from inept.

They were perfectly aware of the trade-off between time and space, and they reacted precisely because the pressing need to pull back the front line had been on their minds. Even if the common sense of not retreating from a critical location was cemented into their brains, they had enough intellectual integrity to fret about how inconsistent that was with their situation.

"There aren't enough forces. Not anywhere near enough. Overcommitting our strategic reserves to a single scrap of supposedly important terrain would only result in a pointless battle of attrition."

Everyone acknowledged Zettour's judgment with wordless groans. No one was happy about it, but they accepted that they had no other choice.

"We are going to abandon the Hofen salient. We should probably plan to assist in the retreat."

"But there's the precedent of Soldim 528 and the viability of a partial envelopment…"

The protest was hesitant. But it was nothing but a greedy wish.

"Is there a reason you're comparing our current situation to the time we used an elite Kampfgruppe and a fresh armored division against an enemy whose main body was busy dealing with Operation Andromeda?"

The force concentration involved and the strategic environment were far too different. The two scenarios couldn't even be compared. With a sober look on his face, Zettour snapped. "If you still have the audacity to recommend we mount a frontal attack, then I order you to give me the location of that brazenness at once. I'll fill out the requisition forms for it right away."

When he shot a sharp glance around the group, they were all wearing the same troubled expression.

If an officer wanted to see what kind of frown they were making in the mirror, all they had to do was look at their neighbors. Intelligent staffers could grasp a situation by simply observing one another's faces.

And what they saw now were one another's pained expressions.

"Good."

"General?"

"Now that we all agree, let's move on. We should discuss how to best support the withdrawal." Zettour rapped his knuckles on the table and dropped his irate tone. "If it's possible for our forces to pull back, then I'd like to use that to set up our next move. Specifically, I'd like to provoke the Federation Army."

"…You mean luring the enemy into the salient? But we don't have enough forces to conduct an encirclement even if we manage to draw them in…"

"I'm all for maneuver war, but we can't keep using the same lure, envelop, then annihilate move every time."

It's like sleight of hand.

There may be a lot of room for creativity with tactics, but falling into a pattern could only spell trouble.

Once the gimmick is revealed, it becomes impossible to stay fed on a single trick.

Zettour smiled faintly. "That said, the instant the enemy thinks they've seen through your tricks is the best time to trap them. Gentlemen, why don't we get a little creative?"

Being denied access to any straightforward method was more than enough to cause them stress, but the best plan in the field would always be the one that could actually be carried out.

The Eastern Army Group was, after all, an army group.

It wasn't as if they couldn't work on things that didn't affect strategy, such as coordinating with the Council for Self-Government, maintaining the supply lines, and improving logistics.

But even so…they were limited by what they could do in the field.

What would the Empire—what would Supreme Command do?

The military wasn't the head. They were the hands and feet. Taking that metaphor to its logical conclusion, the Eastern Army Group was merely a finger on one of those hands, and they had to do whatever they could.

"In any damned case, let's send that multinational voluntary army to a cosmopolitan graveyard." He would have liked another smoke, but he had so few remaining that, grieving inwardly, he chuckled instead. "Gentlemen,

Commies love propaganda. Always keep an eye on where that unit is stationed. The next major thrust will revolve around that location."

"General, in Operation Andromeda, the main battlefield was nowhere near the front lines…"

"That's right. And following Communist logic, that will be the basis for their next move. Of course, we can't know for sure, but it's something to take into consideration."

## AT THE SAME TIME, THE MULTINATIONAL VOLUNTARY ARMY GARRISON

Victory is a cure-all. At the very least, it can sugarcoat just about any conflict.

And the multinational unit that had been getting pummeled by the Imperial Army for so long was no exception.

Thwarting Operation Andromeda had been a major turning point. If nothing else, the Federation was loudly trumpeting their great triumph over the Empire, and their allies were lavishing one another with congratulations.

Even if they suffered a painful defeat in the ensuing maneuver battle, their strategic victory was undeniable.

The improvement in the situation fell like a welcome rain on the multinational unit. This was just perfect for propaganda.

They couldn't have wished for a more politically convenient victory.

That's what had the commander of the Commonwealth Marine Mage Expeditionary Unit, Lieutenant Colonel Drake, in such a good mood.

"…I guess we're making progress."

Fertile ground as far as the eye could see. No sign of the enemy. And as the Imperial Army made their retreat, the Federation Army pushed up.

Drake and his troops had been sortieing daily to support the general advance. Their primary mission was search and destroy. Though they fanned out for maximum coverage on their sorties, encounters were sporadic.

He could only conclude that the imperial ground forces were giving up ground with terrifying practicality and beating a hasty retreat.

The rare reports that did come in were of contact with what seemed to be imperial reconnaissance planes or aerial mages.

"The front is moving faster than I expected."

There was so little prey that they often returned from their sorties empty-handed.

*That's a fine thing*, he was thinking as he gathered up the company under his immediate command, but as they landed, he spotted two familiar faces.

Colonel Mikel and First Lieutenant Liliya Ivanova Tanechka were standing together, their mismatched heights making them an odd couple. One was a comrade in arms he was close with, and the other was a bothersome political officer.

Setting aside the former, if the latter was here to "greet" him, he could only assume trouble was afoot.

What exactly did they want from him?

"Colonel Drake, do you have a moment?"

Just as expected, the one to address him was the Commie dog. He couldn't stand talking to political officers.

If anyone asked him, Drake would probably say that there was almost nothing worse in the world. A conversation with a parrot would probably be more rewarding.

"Yes. Is it for Colonel Mikel or yourself?"

"Comrade Colonel would like to consult with you about the war situation."

"Oh, so it's for Colonel Mikel!" Openly sarcastic, he turned his gaze on the interpreter, Tanechka. "What in the world does the colonel wish to consult me about, Lieutenant?"

Normally, it would be Drake and Mikel who had the discussion—there was no need whatsoever for Tanechka to explain every little thing to Mikel in the Federation's language.

This lieutenant, a political officer, was only present to guarantee the Communist Party's interests under the guise of interpreting.

*I guess I just have to conveniently forget that my friend Colonel Mikel is fluent in the Commonwealth's language.*

*I suppose the important thing about a show is that it must go on.*

It was an utter farce, but the performers, Mikel and Drake, were dead serious. Their audience may have been a single political officer, but when

Mikel's life and more depended on how well they acted, Drake couldn't afford to relax.

"The magic air battles are going well. As our troops advance, the front line will continue moving forward. At this juncture, I'd like to consider a new operation."

"A new operation now?! You'll be sure to tell him, *The Federation's soldiers are just bursting with life and what a fine thing that is*, all right?"

As he stared at her, the first lieutenant seemed to hesitate.

*Oh, I see.*

"And how does the colonel reply?"

"Ummm, I beg your pardon, but could you repeat what you said?"

"Ah, sorry, Lieutenant Tanechka. I guess I spoke too quickly?"

A snarky little jab.

Just a bit of provocation meant to curb her attitude.

The political officer said something to Mikel, and as soon as Mikel nodded a few times, Drake lost no time in expanding on his childish mischief.

"By the way, won't we be getting any reinforcements from the south? A new operation is all well and good, but we can't ignore the issue of manpower."

"According to the party's announcements, the situation in the south is steadily improving, but it's still necessary to watch for a counterattack."

The political officer replied immediately, but this conversation was supposed to be between Mikel and Drake, if only as a formality. Drake vented some of his frustration on Tanechka.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. But you're a lieutenant. We mustn't let a gap in rank become a gap in knowledge. Could you ask Colonel Mikel if we can expect reinforcements, just in case?"

As before, she spoke rapidly to Mikel and then serenaded Drake with a padded-out version of the colonel's utilitarian reply.

"As I thought, his answer is the same. The situation in the south is improving, so this will be the best opportunity for us to pulverize those evil imperialists."

"Very good! So what's the new operation about?"

"It's a proposal that comes straight from the Central Committee."

"Oh? How exciting. What sort of proposal? I can't wait to hear it." Drake's words were practically dripping with veiled contempt. Talking with

these political guard dogs was such torture—all it did was eat away at his dignity and reason.

But the next words out of her mouth ejected those idle thoughts from Drake's mind.

"Party leadership is considering decapitation tactics."

*Decapitation!*

Apparently, it was the perfect time to give the enemy a taste of their own medicine.

That was probably the gist of this idea.

"What's the target?"

"Eastern Army Group HQ. I believe they're targeting the enemy chief of staff, Lieutenant General von Zettour."

"Isn't he an inspector, not chief of staff?"

"But according to testimony from prisoners, he's the one who's actually in charge."

Drake was happy to get a straight answer to his question.

If there was anything to complain about, it was that a mere first lieutenant, even if she was a political officer, was better informed than him, the commander of the Commonwealth forces.

They wouldn't get anywhere like this.

"Lieutenant Tanechka, may I ask you one thing?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sorry, but when did you get that intel?"

"Huh?"

The young political officer bewildered by Drake's irritated gaze probably didn't mean anything by her reply. It most likely never even occurred to her.

Attributing malice when something could just as easily be explained with stupidity only complicated matters.

"No one informed me. Discussing an operation that's premised on intel I haven't received yet is out of the question." Then he emphasized the issue of rank again. "You may be a political officer, Lieutenant Tanechka, but I cannot fathom why you would know something that the commander of the all-volunteer unit from the Commonwealth doesn't. I ask that you provide me with the relevant reports."

"Ummm, well…"

She had put him in a situation where he had no choice but to get angry.

*This is how you treat a fellow soldier who's gone to such lengths to put their life on the line and fight beside you?*

"Did Colonel Mikel know and just not tell me?"

He knew full well that wasn't the case.

If anything, Mikel was even more wary of the Communist government than Drake.

The bigwigs back home really needed to ship a few more career soldiers for a tour in the east. Even a short stay would probably make them appreciate and trust the central government more than ever.

In the Federation, everyone gets to learn just how precious a thing democracy is.

"There was some sort of mix-up, and…I was just about to tell you."

"Very good. Then I'd like to ask you to interpret for me. Please tell him, *I'm sure that going forward you'll provide your allied country with the appropriate intelligence reports.*" *Only then can we continue*, intimated Drake to Tanechka with the feigned smile of a clever diplomat.

"Let's cooperate for the relationship between our nations."

"So you agree?"

The political officer jerked her face up, clearly worried about whether her error would have far-reaching effects. *Honestly, people from the Federation are far too terrified of making mistakes.*

*…We're supposed to be allies, for crying out loud!*

Even the PM said that, if necessary, they would shake hands with the devil and defend him in the House of Commons.

Everything hinged on the words *if necessary*!

And that was how he had been saddled with the abominable task of approaching a political officer with a smile on his face!

"The multinational unit will do everything in its power to succeed on all fronts. That's our role."

This was a political assignment, and ultimately he was under no obligation to follow the Federation's orders. But as long as cooperation was fruitful, obliging his hosts was part of his job.

The home country would probably approve this sort of enjoyable operation. It seemed especially up Major General Habergram's alley.

"From that standpoint, mobilizing the elites should be rather productive—assuming those of us who carry out the plan make it back alive, of course.

But that's what officers are for. I'm willing to give it a shot."

A difficult mission.

But very worthwhile.

It would be easy to get the troops excited about it.

"Can I expect to receive the necessary documents without delay?"

The one who replied to Drake's request and hard stare was, as expected, the political officer. She nodded, forgetting to maintain the facade that she needed to consult Mikel.

"Of course. I'll see to it."

"Good." He nodded, made the decision to shake only Mikel's hand, and promptly returned to his quarters, where he found an unexpected visitor.

It was Tanechka and a crowd of military police. Before he had a chance to wonder what they had come for, the political officer and her entourage noisily slammed packets of paperwork down on his desk.

It was the transcript of the aforementioned prisoner's testimony properly translated into the Commonwealth's language—the materials he had only just requested. Apparently, the Federation Army occasionally delivered what was asked of them in a timely fashion.

*So they had it all this time*, he wanted to groan.

*If it was this easy to do, then just do it from the beginning!* he nearly screamed. After a thought that he was in a room that might be bugged, he pragmatically expressed only his amazement.

*Fuckers.*

Even so, after he looked over the papers and had a chance to think through the situation, he no longer had any choice but to say what he thought.

"Crap, this guy… He's one tough customer."

The target was a high-ranking general. Any commander who made frequent use of decapitation tactics naturally knew how to guard against them. Based on what was in the documents, it was clear that this general moved quickly and often.

The conditions necessary for this sort of operation couldn't even be compared to a strike on a fixed target. Even if they could count on tips from the Federation partisans, there was no way they would be able to nail down his location for certain.

"…How are we going to catch a moving target? We'll have to know what his plans are."

The chance of missing their shot was enormous.

"Even if we can find him, there's still a whole pile of other issues. Can we take out his security detail fast enough? What should we do if he escapes?"

In short, it was too high risk.

"I'm not sure how the imperials managed to make this tactic work so often."

Surprisingly, the enemy had been using this stratagem to incredible effect.

He despised them, but as a professional, he had to respect their skill.

The two "coincidental run-ins" off the Norden coast, the attack on the Republican Army's Rhine front headquarters, and finally the exasperatingly frequent strikes on key Federation Army positions…

*And I guess it's appropriate to include the landing operation against the Entente Alliance, too. You could call it a successful instance of flanking a land army by sea.*

The more he thought about it, the more he realized how well planned all their moves were.

Analysts in the home country pointed out the possibility that they were all just haphazard decisions, but…as someone with experience on the lines, Drake wondered if it was really possible to get lucky so many times. Even well-laid plans often fail. Explaining away success as repeated flukes was out of the question.

"Just winging it in war? Ridiculous."

They couldn't all be coincidences. Without intensive research and development of a fully fleshed-out operational doctrine, it would be impossible to get such consistent and stunning results.

Therefore, learning from the enemy was the best option…but the details of the greatest example—the direct attack on the Republican Army's Rhine headquarters—were still largely unavailable. It was clear that some sort of aerial operation had been carried out, but no mages were detected until they completed a long-range flight, at which point they descended in sync with some kind of supporting bombardment, perhaps a railway gun attack or the like.

*There was also the hypothesis that it had been an aerial bomb and not a railway gun…but there was so much chaos.* Before any sort of proper inspection could be made, they had been overrun by the Imperial Army.

"It's a bit late to say so, but there really are too many mysteries. I can't

believe we have to hunt around just to find something to analyze."

He could remember the confusion of the collapsing lines even now. It was no wonder there weren't enough records. But he had to get some research done, or he really wouldn't get anywhere.

"I wish someone would show me how to do the trick. Maybe I should inquire with the home country and get in touch with the Free Republic as well…"

*Surely someone back home would have a clue or two. The issue there is how it always takes time for intel to make it back out to the boys and girls in the field.*

The problem of time was surprisingly serious.

Drake wanted whatever clues he could get as soon as he could get them. Lives were hanging in the balance. It was only natural that every second counted.

*Even if I can't expect much, I suppose I should still request materials from the Federation Army… Then again, even though they were the ones to propose the operation, these louts didn't offer anything in the planning stage.*

*I can't count on them. Should've known better than to expect anything from Communists in the first place. Are there any other sources I'm missing?* After turning these thoughts over in his mind for a moment, he pounded his palm.

"Hmm? Oh right, there are some guys in the press corps I can talk to. Wasn't Andrew on the Rhine?"

The embedded journalists were one option.

He didn't have high expectations, but it was worth trying. Either way, out in the middle of nowhere, deep inside Federation territory, he didn't have many ways to acquire intelligence.

*It can't hurt…*

However, a knock on the door interrupted that train of thought.

"Colonel Drake? May I have a moment—uh, sir?"

"Of course. Who is it? You can come in."

He could chalk up the quirky way of talking to unfamiliarity with the Commonwealth language and overlook the impropriety, but there was only one officer under him who would say things that way.

Honestly, it was hard to keep her reined in…but not impossible, which was perhaps the blessing in the curse.

“Lieutenant Sue? I see you’re back.”

“Yes, I’m preparing my report. We didn’t encounter any enemies, though, and we hardly spotted any on the ground, either.”

“Good. Turn in the full details later.”

First Lieutenant Sue nodded quite obediently in response to Drake’s request. She had just returned from leading a unit on a mission with a degree of independence.

He couldn’t completely rest easy, but things were stable enough that he could afford a compromise or two.

The fact that he had been able to get her to settle down at all had to be thanks to divine intervention.

“No rampages, huh?”

Needing to handle her with kid gloves was not ideal. It was actually rather problematic. But whether he wanted to or not, he had to find a use for her. He figured he should be happy he was able to manage her at all.

“Not bad.” He even found himself murmuring, “Honestly, a war you can win is so nice.”

Did finding his own words moving make him an idiot? Truly, though, he was enjoying how grateful victory made him feel.

“Few deaths and a decreasing number of disputes. All good things. How nice it’s been since the Lergen Kampfgruppe left.”

He wasn’t actually thanking the enemy or anything. Perhaps it was the Lord’s protection, or maybe the imperials were just stupid—either way he didn’t mind getting a chance to take it easy.

“…I feel for Mr. John, though.”

For those in the field, a challenging enemy withdrawing is great fortune.

“Still, we have our own issues. There are tricky orders coming down the chain of command. If anything, I wish we could get some sympathy.”

Once the menace of the Lergen Kampfgruppe had receded, Sue and the others in the unit only became unrulier. Right when they were starting to get results, and the war seemed to be swinging in their favor.

The deeply worrying issue of Mikel and Tanechka sharing command authority still hadn’t been resolved, either. Simply overseeing the multinational voluntary army on a day-to-day basis was already a nightmare. If they ran into trouble on the battlefield, then what would happen?

“Aren’t we winning right now, though? Maybe I’m overthinking things.”

*No.* Drake braced himself against optimism.

"That Zettour is far too disturbing."

One moment, the enemy general would ferociously commit to relieving a beleaguered position, and then the next, he would go silent and vanish. It would be great if he would just hole up somewhere or retreat. He constantly kept people guessing.

Right up until the moment he really did retreat.

…A dedicated enemy who always demanded a price in blood and iron. Drake had no doubt he was up to no good.

It made perfect sense to lop off the head of the imperial forces. As much as he disliked agreeing with the Federation leadership—or rather, the Communists.

But he had to accept it.

A decapitation strike was worth considering.

The risk was huge, and he also had to admit that the unit carrying out the mission would be essentially wandering the desperate realm of catastrophic failure or death. As a unit commander, Drake ordinarily did his best to avoid those kinds of situations. On the other hand, he had to recognize the idea for its tactical and strategic merits.

Whoever coined the phrase *the officer's dilemma* knew exactly what they were talking about.

*What to do?* he thought with an overwhelming longing for a cigar.

He mulled over it for some time.

"Colonel…sir? Food's ready."

Hearing the orderly's voice brought him back to his senses. Drake instinctively glanced at the clock. He had been lost in thought for quite a while.

"Shoot. It's already this late? Better eat while the food is still hot."

*What a waste of time.* Drake shook his head as he stood up. *I should've had a good idea or three if I was going to spend so long thinking…* He just couldn't come up with anything unless he flooded his brain with alcohol.

It was times like these that really made him miss knocking back a beer at the local pub. Maybe it was time to open the bottle of wine he'd won from the reporters in a game of cards.

If he used it as a chance to hear from them, that could be considered a necessary expense… No, officers couldn't go around getting drunk.

“What’s for dinner tonight?”

“Our supply situation improved. We got some colonial stuff.”

“Oh?”

*That’s something to look forward to*, he was thinking as he joined the stream of soldiers heading to the officers’ mess when he noticed a mountain of cans. The delivery must have just arrived. They were even individually wrapped.

Heading toward that trove of canned and bottled goods, the grinning officers were enjoying themselves quite a bit. And why wouldn’t they be? The labels weren’t written in the Federation’s language that they had gotten used to seeing. It was all familiar Commonwealth markings. In other words, these were the same supplies the people in the colonies received. And the only ones who would send individually wrapped canned goods during wartime were colonists.

When he entered the officers’ mess, anticipation running high, he saw that most everyone had already arrived.

In the hands of his happily chatting subordinates were…teacups. Wafting up from them came the rich, fresh smell the Commonwealth took so much pride in.

“Straight from port. Fancy a cuppa, Colonel?”

“Not bad, not bad. So the colonists sent tins of tea as well? I guess I should have some. I’d like to try putting some jam in, too.”

“Ah, so it’s heresy, then?”

It was easy to laugh off the friendly jab. That had gotten much easier ever since the war situation seemed to be tipping in their favor.

“When in Rome, am I right? Communists are impossible to stomach, but we can at least try the way they drink their tea, right?”

When he glanced at the table—*Oh, today it’s blueberry jam*.

Cookies instead of scones was acceptable. The bread may have been hard, but at least it was white. Anything was better than hardtack.

Bean soup, a simple fish dish, a meat dish—not bad at all. Considering they were at war, this was basically a full-course meal.

The food was about as good as they could expect on the front lines.

Things finally seemed to be headed in the right direction.

“It’s nice to have things like this once in a while on the battlefield. Let’s enjoy some quality for a change.”

## JULY 1, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL CAPITAL, ZOLKA CAFË

Colonel Uger has offered to treat Tanya to a meal. What a moving gesture of friendship.

Professionally, it can't hurt to rub elbows with someone in the rail administration—and he's a useful friend besides. Throw in a free meal on top, and Tanya has no choice but to show up. Uger is an affable man, so it's an easy decision to meet him.

On this day, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff was careless.

After a stroll down familiar streets, she steps into Zolka Café, clearly in a great mood and excited for coffee. When she spots Uger's rather tired-looking face, they trade polite greetings as she takes a seat.

It isn't until the meal is about to begin that I realize I've miscalculated.

The dishes served at the venerable Zolka Café adhere to tradition, meaning an initial offering of bread, then an appetizer, the main course, and a spot of tea to conclude the affair.

That's all well and good, but there is one issue—every single thing being served is ersatz.

"…What do you think, Colonel Degurechaff? About this home-country feast?" There's a faintly childish look tinged with sadness on Uger's face. Maintaining that unusual expression, he chuckles and says, "From the look on your face, it seems that my ambush worked."

He certainly pulled a fast one on me. Tanya half-jokingly nods. "To be shot in the back. What nasty business."

"A soldier as distinguished as you should have another set of eyes back there."

"If it were the notorious General von Zettour inviting me out, maybe, but I thought I could afford to lower my guard if it was a classmate from war college."

Uger shakes his head, finding that out of character. "I thought you were the embodiment of constant vigilance, on and off the battlefield."

"Even on a battlefield, you have to trust your allies. This is rather cruel."

“Successfully springing a trap on a recipient of the Silver Wings Assault Badge will make for a great war story. I’ll have to tell my daughter someday.”

“Too bad that she’ll also have to find out you’re a reprobate who would betray his sworn friend.”

“Please no. Anything but that.”

A good father, Uger worries his daughter might hate him. The family man raises his hands in surrender. They must be close. What a peaceful scene from the rear. I’m jealous. It makes me want to snark at him some more about being served K-Brot for dinner.

“Personally, I’d like to express my good fellow soldier spirit, but sadly I don’t think my tongue will cooperate.”

“It’s having a fit over K-Brot?”

“Yes, it’s quite a real struggle.”

Serving someone K-Brot on the home front is basically violence.

Food quality and quantity is directly linked to morale on the front lines, so more often than not, the soldiers in the thick of hard fighting receive rations of genuine rye bread. Even so, it’s difficult to feed everyone without someone somewhere having to make do with K-Brot, so even frontline troops have eaten it a few times, whether they like it or not.

But…the flavor and adulterations of the home country’s K-Brot are so bad I’d almost call it KK-Brot.

“I’ll never forget the first time I tried K-Brot. I honestly wondered if the idiots back home had developed it to be used as punishment or illegal torture.”

“I feel for you, Colonel. But look. Now everything on the table is food substitutes.”

As Uger said, Zolka Café can’t even hide it anymore.

The meat is practically a disaster. What they bring is nonperishable rations of fish and vegetable matter that was manufactured who knows how many years ago—revolting stuff called De De-Fleisch.

This is the state of the rear—and Zolka Café in the capital.

It’s so bad that if I didn’t know how this place used to be, it would sincerely stump me how they could stay in business while serving such awful food.

The meals here were quite enjoyable. But that’s all in the past now.

Grudgingly moving her fork and knife, Tanya crams some of the unidentifiable mush into her mouth. The jumble of flavors is impossible to ignore.

"…Has it gotten worse?"

"Well, the chef and cooks were drafted, so there's that. But the main issue afflicting the capital is one you're familiar with. Even the best cook would struggle with rations this bad."

"I'd like to hope the logistics situation improves…"

"That makes sense, but…this is better than if it started tasting bizarrely good."

*Hmm?* Tanya furrows her brow in response to Uger's comment. *Wouldn't an improvement in food quality be a good thing?*

"Zolka Café is making do with what it's rationed."

*Ahhh.* Tanya nods as it becomes clear what he's getting at. I had to get creative to sort out the Kampfgruppe's food situation, too. There are times when it becomes necessary to carry out decidedly gray-area methods of procurement—essentially pilfering from the food stores.

The pain of having to produce something even when supplies run low hits close to home.

"They're making quite an effort… *Valiant* is the only word for it."

Not resorting to the black market or procuring things through other illicit channels is certainly praiseworthy. But it tastes bad. It tastes so, so bad.

"Knowing where your food comes from is great as long as it also tastes good."

I don't have any pretensions about being a gourmet, but when things have gone this downhill, it's impossible to simply let it pass without comment.

When food is one of the few things we can still look forward to, this is beyond the pale.

It's not tasty. Simply put, there could be nothing blander. With meals like this, morale in the trenches would crumble like bad K-Brot.

"That comment makes me question your own law-abiding spirit, Colonel."

"I'm sorry, Colonel Uger, but I'm an aerial mage. Without the regular intake of calories, I may very well starve to death before I even take to the air."

Shoving crap food down your throat eats away at the mind faster than

you'd think. War is already unbelievably stressful, so some consideration for mental health would be nice. Could the higher-ups keep it a little at the forefront of their minds that food is one of the rare joys that can be found on the battlefield?

I don't mean to deny how critical it is to be conscious of the supply situation, but we can let the Commies be the ones to rely on endless single-product production. Abundance is what grants capitalism its legitimacy.

"You mean you're particular about food because it's part of your duty?"

"I'm a growing girl."

"Ha, well said. In that case, I can put in a word to the dining room at the General Staff Office if you'd like. I could treat you to all the food you can eat, but…"

"Are you offering to pay for all my meals, Colonel Uger?"

"…We should probably refrain, for both of our sakes."

"It's gotten that bad?"

That makes me wonder if the food served to the staff officers is as awful as ever, but Uger cocks his head slightly.

Hmm, that was a curious reaction.

"Well…hmm. How to describe it? It's bad, but it's not especially bad."

"I cannot even begin to guess what you mean by that."

Uger rephrases. "If I had to put it another way… Lately the gap in quality between the dining room and outside restaurants has lessened."

"You mean it improved?! Really? Is that even possible?!"

He responds to her tremendous shock with an emotional headshake. "If only that were true. It's simply that poor-tasting food has become the norm."

"Meaning…"

He's saying that relatively speaking, it's not so bad anymore. But also that it's just as awful as it's always been. The only explanation is that food everywhere else got worse overall.

"Rather than the General Staff Office's fare improving, civilian fare has gone dramatically downhill. As a result, there are now people who voluntarily eat at the office when pressed for time."

"Surely you're joking."

"No, it's terrible but true."

He replies with a straight face, and I honestly can't laugh even if I wanted to.

Tanya's been "treated" to meals at that dining room a few times by General von Zettour as a sort of power harassment… *Things have gotten so bad people actually choose to eat there?*

Can this get any more horrifying?

The more I think about it, the more the Empire's food situation comes into sharp focus. If people are actually choosing to eat at the General Staff Office dining room, doesn't that mean civilization itself has been defeated?

"Total war is truly a scourge," Tanya murmurs before dropping her gaze to her hands.

Colored hot water in a pretty vessel. What a wretched feeling. The best porcelain filled with the most disappointing substitute. The porcelain, rich with the scent of civilization, only makes that juxtaposition more depressing.

"Even drinks have become victims."

Two bitter laughs and a pair of sober expressions.

This lukewarm, tinted water is supposed to be black tea. Even the lowest-quality tea looks and smells better than this.

"It's a type of herb tea that has been popular of late. Apparently, it's really good for you if you need a diet high in fiber, Colonel von Degurechaff."

"I have nothing against being health conscious, but I do wonder about the merits of involuntarily losing weight and cramming your stomach full of indigestible food substitutes. Honestly, it doesn't seem very agreeable. I'm repeating myself, but I *am* a growing girl, you know." Now wearing a frown, Tanya makes her position on the matter quite clear. "More than anything, it's a matter of taste… I'm not opposed to herb tea. I'd just rather have black tea or coffee."

"Caffeine, huh?"

"I'm a civilized person, after all."

Coffee and black tea are perhaps one of the greatest catalysts for progress. It creates a demand for clean boiled water and robust trade networks to distribute commercial products.

Commerce is the best driver of diverse cultural exchange and societal advancement. Thus, it's only natural to consider caffeine a good friend of the modern citizen.

"To be blunt, Colonel Uger, principles surrounding beverages should not be made light of. Even I find it difficult to get on well with people who have bad taste in tea."

“Is that a matter of taste?” Uger lifts his teacup with a finger, a wry smile on his face as he speaks. “Sadly, it’s always tastes like that that fall victim to war first—tea and coffee being prime examples.”

“As you say, but surely that doesn’t mean we have to meekly resign ourselves to our miserable fates.” Joking mildly, Tanya winces. “There are times an officer has to fight tooth and nail.”

“I’m afraid this is one time you’ll have to give in, Colonel von Degurechaff. Without your gift from the east, it’s questionable whether there would have even been any sugar.”

The Empire used to be the biggest sugar producer before the war. Then the potato became the most prioritized crop amid repeated calls for more food.

The more I learn, the more heavily reality weighs on me.

“Total war is encroaching on every aspect of daily life now?”

“That’s right. Everyday existence has become much less convenient.”

“But it’s not that bad, is it?”

“…What do you mean by that?” Uger leans in to peer into her eyes. Did Tanya say something that shocking?

“Life may be harder now, but it’s still the same peaceful rear.”

There aren’t enemies lurking behind every corner that need to be cleared out. The home front is a peaceful world where a person can stroll down the street with their wallet in hand. The soldiers we pass by all have crisply starched uniforms.

You won’t find the muck of the trenches here.

No charging Commies, no guerrillas of unknown nationality, no friendly fire from incompetent allies—it’s an extremely orderly space.

To Tanya, the rear is still as inviting as a warm bath.

“I respect the sacrifices of the home front, but during a war, they’ll just have to accept this degree of suffering.”

There’s no disdain or mockery in that statement.

If you’re asking me to compare this place to the front lines, I have to say I much prefer it in the rear. It’s undoubtedly safer here than there.

It’s the objective truth—self-evident and axiomatic.

Despite this being the case, Uger’s expression contorts. Anyone watching would instantly recognize the anger and grief marring his face.

“Colonel Degurechaff…I’d like you to put those thoughts on the back

burner." With a sigh, he looks up at the ceiling before continuing. "…I do have one suggestion on the topic, though."

"Oh, what might that be?"

"I told the lieutenant generals this as well, but you and they are birds of a feather. I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but your minds are too sharp."

It's unclear whether that's praise or criticism.

It's not a straightforward compliment, but it's not as if he's disparaging Tanya, either. And there are worse things than being grouped with influential figures like Rudersdorf and Zettour.

"What do you mean?"

When he's asked to clarify, Uger clams up. The awkward way he brings the cup of gross "herb tea" to his mouth—his hesitation is practically overflowing.

If he's this unsettled, the sentiment must be so biting that he's hesitant to even say it out loud.

"You can tell me, whatever it is."

When Tanya stares at him, he heaves another heavy sigh.

Does this man intend to drive global warming all on his own?

Considering the industrialization in this era…there must already be a massive amount of greenhouse gasses in the air, but no one sees it as an issue. People are more worried about the planet cooling. Maybe I should warn them that in the long run, the trapped heat is a much greater concern?

The silence continues long enough for these idle musings to cross my mind before Uger finally speaks up again.

"…I need you to take in some human emotions."

"I beg your pardon, but are you saying that…I'm—?"

"To put it bluntly, I'd like to ask you to do what is natural as a human."

Is he saying I'm not human? That's awfully unexpected. I feel like there are few people who can boast a sense of individuality as polished as mine. Even that piece of shit Being X would be hard-pressed to deny that.

"Is there a reason why my humanity has come into question? My character? Colonel, on my honor, I've carried out my duties perfectly…!"

In a flash of apparent anger, Tanya half-rises out of her seat, only for Uger to hastily add, "This is not a condemnation! Please understand!"

"Could you elaborate?"

“I have no intention of disparaging your character! I swear—it’s simply frank advice! Please just think of it as a candid suggestion.”

“…So you’re pointing out a shortcoming?”

Sitting back down, Tanya asks a pointed question, and Uger simply nods in response, as a staff officer is wont to. No point in trying to dodge the subject.

“When it comes to right and wrong, you expect too much too fast, and you’re overly harsh on those who don’t measure up. Given your upbringing and experience, I can understand why you behave that way, but…it’s a bad habit.” He continues with a look of heartfelt exhaustion on his face. “After all, most emotions are persistent. Once they get tangled up, it takes time to smooth them out.”

“I can’t say I don’t understand…”

“But you still want to disagree?”

“Yes,” Tanya replies honestly.

I can acknowledge the basic truth that emotions can be stubborn.

By the time some idiot who’s given himself over to his emotions pushes you off a train platform and Being X—awfully short-tempered for someone who claims to be a supernatural deity—misdirects his anger at you and the Reich throws itself in the middle of a war in service of the emotional arguments made by those who are long dead, the basic truth about human emotions becomes quite clear. Who would know better than a victim of it like me?

Which is why that harm has to be condemned. If something gets snagged, it can simply be cut away. Isn’t that how the Gordian knot was unraveled?

“We aren’t children who have the luxury of wailing about what we do or don’t like.”

People who reach adulthood become full members of society, at which point good sense is something they are required to have.

If all humanity only ever acted on their emotions, the cornerstones of civilization probably never would have been laid. If we always resolved things with brute force, the doctrine of nuclear mutually assured destruction would never have been realized.

I’m loath to admit it, but the examples of history cannot be denied. Even the Commies managed to maintain some base level of rationality. Although I’m still skeptical as to whether that can be truly defined as reason…

Anyway, the truth is good enough. Both sides brandished their nuclear weapons, threatened mutual assured destruction, stockpiled enough toxic substances to reduce the globe to cinders, and yet the Cold War never went hot.

Viva civilization. Viva rationality.

"Necessity requires reason. Hesitation, trepidation, lack of a firm resolve—they're all synonymous with lost opportunity. Nothing but shackles."

This isn't pretense or a facade but simply my honest thoughts.

In biological competition, which is in a sense nastier and more brutal than market competition, soldiers on a battlefield must make split-second decisions on which lives quite literally depend. And they must do this on the fly, under circumstances that often offer no room for caution.

Rather than what's ideal, we need to choose whatever is good enough in the time allotted. The opportunity cost of time, especially during wartime, weighs heavier than some poor sod's life. Naturally, my own life and assets are a different story.

"…That's exactly my point."

Judging by Uger's expression and tone of voice, he doesn't find much to agree with in Tanya's impassioned declaration of commitment to those guiding principles—though surely any field officer would completely agree with each and every detail, not to mention the general tone of her remarks.

"I can't understand that mentality of unconditionally abiding by necessity." The voice he quietly emits is a groan. "I'm an adult. I've received a thorough education as a General Staff officer. Even so, right now I want to curl up like a child and sob."

"Huh…?"

"Colonel, I just can't comprehend it. I'm honestly incapable of understanding your idea of 'necessity.'"

I'm struck by a wave of confusion. This is more shocking than an indestructible wall that suddenly crumbles.

What does he mean he can't understand? Of all the ridiculous…

"Excuse me for pointing out the obvious, but you *are* a General Staff officer, Colonel."

He received a proper education at the war college. Once you become a staff officer, the staff officer paradigm is repeatedly pounded into your brain.

Yet, here is a staff officer openly saying he wants to break down and cry?

Keep it together, man!

"We are staff officers. We are—must be—beings who, through shared knowledge and training, all follow the same unshakable creed."

"You're saying there should be no way I don't understand?"

"Yes, Colonel Uger. It should be impossible on principle."

Staff officers are educated to be staff officers.

The fundamental and also most basic concept is necessity. Once set, goals must be carried out with firm resolve.

It's both the mother of invention and our loathsome duty. If it is required of us, we have no choice. No hesitation, no delays. All indecision and complaint must be set aside. We always do our jobs.

"Education at the war college is extremely simple. Its goal is to mass-produce staff officers, so once you've set foot in the classroom, the thinking and behavior of a staff officer should sink into your bones. That's the kind of people we should be now…"

Emotional issues are an element of the will to fight that need to be taken into consideration and accounted for. They mustn't be any more or less than that, and they cannot ever cause a staff officer to waver.

They beat that into us from the moment school started.

"What do you think, Colonel?"

"…What you're saying makes sense. And in fact, I do grasp the logic. Thankfully, my memory is halfway decent." He shakes his head, however. "But I've been in the rear for too long. I've become human. I'm sure that's been the case since my daughter was born."

After a moment's hesitation, he feebly wrenches some words from inside his chest.

"Colonel Degurechaff, I…I can't go on in life as a monstrous staff officer. I'm nothing but a weak human. Once, I wanted to be a monster, but it's beyond me now."

A declaration of his humanity?

From someone who went through the same war college curriculum as me? From my classmate, a capable worker with integrity as well as a man who possesses all the virtues of a modern citizen?

"That can't be! You're worrying far too much!" Tanya raises her voice to encourage him. "You're a fine staff officer! I've heard how talented you are. I know you must be tired, but surely there's no reason to lose heart!"

“I’m barely useful as a distribution and logistics overseer. And even then, most of my duties just involve negotiating in the rear. It has nothing to do with what staff officers should really be working on.”

He weakly mocks himself, lamenting how he can’t be of any use on the battlefield.

“Worst of all, I’m a third-rate operations man. I hesitate too much. I’m absolutely useless when it comes to being a commander. For better or worse, I can at least see myself objectively.”

Uger utters this unbelievable self-evaluation in a detached way, and it’s completely beyond my ability to understand.

What in the world is going on?

“Honestly, I’m so glad I got stationed in the rear, and it was all thanks to you.” Uger’s head bows low.

Though it’s not busy, per se, we’re still in public at Zolka Café. If he’s this unconcerned by what people might think, he must be serious. His expression isn’t visible from where Tanya’s sitting, but I have to believe that whatever sincerity or whatnot is there has to be genuine.

If Tanya laughs it off, her social skills will undoubtedly be brought into question. After a moment’s indecision, I opt for a benign response.

“With all due respect…back then, I was merely advising you as a concerned classmate.”

“Even so. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Being thanked so personally like this feels… Hmm, is it the joy of a civilian? Perhaps I’ve been on the front lines too long—the lump forming in Tanya’s throat is enormous.

“And now it’s my turn to give you advice. I understand that you personally aren’t evil—that’s precisely why I’m telling you these things.”

“I appreciate the kind gesture.”

“…Don’t say it so formally, Colonel.”

“It’s just my nature.”

I’m not stupid enough to let my guard down and abandon etiquette with work friends. Really, that’s the norm in the Empire.

“That it is. You really are that kind of person. Your dedication to duty is entirely too perfect. If I didn’t know better, I would peg you for a cold-blooded beast. You’re not worried about people getting the wrong idea about you?”

What a polite warning. Honestly, Uger tends to be much more personal than the typical citizen of the Empire. Of course, looking that up in a dictionary would also turn up the word *busybody*.

Tanya puffs out her chest and says, "At any rate, I'm fairly proud of the relationships I've built…"

"Ha-ha-ha. It's always the person in question who is the last to realize. Let me just say as a friend that you should be careful, Degurechaff."

"I'm blessed with good superiors, reliable brothers-in-arms, and even good subordinates. My relationships with people are one of the very few things I can boast about."

Capable bosses, a former classmate who makes life easier for me, and my trusty meat shield. They're all well trained to boot, so what more can I ask for?

I even have other colleagues and subordinates I can trust. In the rapidly deteriorating Imperial Army, it's probably rare to find an officer as lucky as me.

"Pride in your friendships…hmm? Well, you're free to have that if you like, I suppose."

"Hooray for freedom. Hooray for friendship. That's about all I have to say on the matter."

"I see," Uger says, his smile darkening just slightly. Then he says casually but with a subtle change in tone, "…Oh, right. On that note about friendship… This is a personal topic I'd like to discuss with you in confidence…"

"What might that be?"

I notice the unspoken signal.

It's information from an unofficial connection. Those kinds of tidbits are very important. An idiot will tell you to get your intel on the news, but by the time anything is being broadcast to the world at large, those in the know have long since heard the outcome.

During wartime, the only way to grasp the fluid, ever-changing situation is to draw information out of the insiders.

See? My relationships are serving me perfectly fine. You worry too much, Uger, and more so than I expected.

"I have bad news."

Maybe that's why he's giving me these roundabout warnings? To express

heartfelt gratitude, Tanya bows her head and listens with every fiber of her body.

"I think I mentioned it before. The let's-be-friends-again party I was planning at my buddy's house. I'm sure you remember. Does it ring a bell?"

Buddy, party, and…making up with someone?

Given the context, I guess he's referring to the peace talk negotiations via Ildoa.

"Oh, our mutual pal? You have an update on the plans?"

"It's just not coming together. We left it at *Perhaps under different circumstances*."

"Our friend who was going to mediate said that?!"

If Ildoa is hampering communication between the Empire and the Commonwealth, that could be a major signal as to which side they're really on. Well, that's just great. Tanya is furrowing her brow when she notices Uger shaking his head.

"No, it was our choice."

"That's a surprise. I thought you wanted to make up."

"Sadly, the distance has grown too large. I didn't feel like talking anymore, so I simply got up and left."

"I see. That's too bad. Understood."

Ooh, these bastards. The imperial leadership's feet fell asleep! Here we are, direly in need of peace, but they can't tolerate a little discomfort? Unbelievable!

This news is so bad that if she didn't know Uger, Tanya would have jumped up and yelled that he was talking absolute nonsense.

"Not that it's really a substitute, but I'm planning a field trip with General Rudersdorf. You should come and watch."

Our hopes for peace have been crushed, so we're going on a field trip? Only one thing needs to be made clear right now.

"Is that an order?"

"It is."

His matter-of-fact reply as he nods is the necessary and sufficient condition.

"Then I'll do as instructed."

"I appreciate it, Colonel."

"Don't mention it."

This exchange is over, but why had Uger felt the need to declare his humanity? Tanya doesn't have an answer.

## JULY 2, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL, NEAR CENTRAL STATION

Trains bound for the east leave the imperial capital every single day. Eagerly awaiting their next leave, soldiers brace themselves all along the eastern front or perhaps trembling in the trenches.

Every last one of them is homesick. Sadly, given the critical state of the war and the deteriorating railway situation, getting a chance to actually go on your allotted leave is almost too much to wish for.

On the other hand, the capital also welcomes returnees on a daily basis. Many must have dreamed of returning to their Heimat and savoring the beer of their hometown, but instead they come back as silent coffins.

Though the main point of departure during this great war had shifted from west to east, returnees were still coming back to the capital horizontal in their coffins.

Tanya has been supplied with civilian mourning clothes, and the ceremony she is ordered to attend is one of those ubiquitous memorial services for the war dead.

Military business without the military attire. Apparently, she's just a private citizen for today. Lieutenant General Rudersdorf has also removed his uniform to put on plain formal wear. He all but tells her to follow him with the way he pointedly walks over to one corner of the venue.

I'm not getting the sense that he'll take no for an answer. Tanya has no choice but to swallow her questions, purse her lips, and follow him.

Before long, they reach a spot just a short way from the north exit of the train station.

In every direction, all that can be seen is black. Mixed in with the throng of mourning clothes, the occasional dress uniform interrupts the wall of muted colors.

*Are those white spots navy dress uniforms? They stick out too much.*

The thin streaks of white give the crowd a strange, mottled pattern. And most of the visible army officers are ranked captain or lower. The ones overseeing the procession are field officers, at least, but…compared to Tanya's and the general's formal wear, it's plain to see how the folks in uniform are extremely conspicuous.

In impersonal, black mourning clothes, you cease to be an individual and fade into the background. It was a smart choice as a camouflage. Thus, Tanya is able to attend this funeral as a mere bystander.

That said, she's in the Empire, and this is a ceremony, so certain norms still need to be followed.

No matter where it takes place, all these things start the same way.

A sad bugle rings out. Whether a simplified service on the front or a memorial service for the war dead in the rear, the song is always the same.

Frankly, the Empire loves decorum.

Whether in the capital, on the forward-most line, or yes, in the trenches of the east, the dead are grieved for in the prescribed way.

Apparently, I've gotten quite used to hearing this song. It really does make you recall your fellow soldiers, and the melody lingers in Tanya's ears. It almost lulls her into acting instinctively, without thinking.

Standing at attention, she stops short of saluting. She's dressed as a civilian right now. She snaps her rising arm back down and swallows a little sigh.

The goal here is observation.

Thus, she takes a closer look, and…she finds herself unexpectedly confused.

She can't see.

The reason for poor visibility is, to be blunt, a sea of people's backs.

Normally her subordinates are considerate and keep out of her way, but naturally she can't expect that treatment from the masses… *How am I supposed to do anything like this?*

"Can you see?"

She responds to the teasing officer's voice honestly, with some impatience.

"I-it's a bit… Well, with my height, I can't quite make out…"

On the front line, my height doesn't inconvenience me at all. Sometimes it even makes my life easier—for instance, I don't need to crouch as much as the others. But it's not very helpful when I'm standing upright in a crowd of people.

The height disparity is undeniable. I admit it—I'm tiny. Of course, since I present a smaller target to the enemy, that just means I'm optimized for the battlefield.

How frustrating that I'm not optimized for a civilized urban landscape.

"You can't see at all, huh?"

"Er…not from here, unfortunately."

"And it would be rather inappropriate for me to hoist you up on my shoulders."

It's exceedingly clear that her superior, smiling like somebody's kindly grandfather, is having a laugh at my expense. This is what makes staff officers such nasty characters.

I'm not happy I have to show a strange weakness in such an unusual moment…but I must admit that Tanya is on the short side.

"Are you saying I could sit on your shoulders?"

"What? That's what you want? Then I suppose I could do that."

Despite my best attempt to rattle him, the general's defenses are impregnable.

Political animals though they may be, as social animals, there are lines humans should not cross. And if I'm being honest, I'd do just about anything else than have to sit on his shoulders.

"…No, er…"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about me. I have the strength."

He laughs while assuring me that he's plenty capable of holding me up, and my spine practically freezes.

If he puts me on his shoulders here, the shame will stay with me for the rest of my life. If there end up being photos, any honor and dignity I may have accumulated will be obliterated. I started this, but surely my only choice is to respectfully decline.

"I'm honored by your offer, but I believe the circumstances call for some reserve. Perhaps another time."

"I see." Rudersdorf laughs, utterly unperturbed. Is it just me, or is he enjoying himself quite a bit at this funeral?

It makes me question his humanity. Even the people like Tanya who are here for work are maintaining a somber expression, yet here he is screwing around!

Is he socially awkward or something?

In the rear, for better or worse, social etiquette is alive and well. Though I'd just as soon rather not, if people see a child standing on tiptoes, I'm sure the ladies and gentlemen around us will naturally give way.

Specifically, a bit of piss-poor acting takes care of the crowd. I suppose Rudersdorf feels a bit like Moses when he dons a mournful expression and appeals to bystanders with phrases like "Please, this little girl is trying to see…"

And so there's no choice but to take part in this awkward theatrical production. Bowing apologetically, I occupy the space that has instantly been created for me.

As I push forward, my field of vision opens up.

The bit about the shoulder ride must have been a jab. Staff officers often take the initiative to exploit the things that people hate.

Yes, that's the problem with staff officers.

Still, as a result, I can see now.

Turning her head to look around, Tanya's focused eyes notice that everything is laid out in a completely standard manner. The service is very by the book, and no matter how hard she looks, there is nothing particularly novel about it. To be honest, I'm sick of seeing these things.

After all, the east is one of the major processing centers for turning soldiers into war dead.

The eastern front transforms the raw materials ferried from the imperial capital into corpses and then delivers them back home. The capital exports raw materials and imports war dead—it's a processing trade.

Of course, I recognize regional variation with different locations. Case in point, the capital is as far as you can get from the front lines. Given the location, there is a notable presence of black civilian mourning dress.

But that's it.

There's no real reason to be here studying the scene.

"…Look at them."

Following the finger that poked her in the shoulder and then points… Tanya can make out a group of people with crisply starched clothing. On the

eastern front, other soldiers carry the casket, but here they appear to be honor guards.

"Hmm?"

That's when Tanya notices something. They're awfully—how to say—they make the casket look so heavy. They're probably not breathing hard, but it's obvious from a glance that they're straining.

*Strange.*

That coffin shouldn't even have anything in it—it's most likely just an empty box. Are they acting as if an actual body is inside out of consideration for all the civilians in attendance?

But the war has been going on long enough that surely it's common knowledge by now that you're lucky if there's so much as a bone to put in the casket. It's impossible to gloss over that reality.

What's more, this performance isn't even regulation for burying the war dead. There's no stipulation that the casket should be carried as if it was a heavy burden, as far as I'm aware… Was it revised while I wasn't looking?

Or did they really throw a body that decomposed into that coffin? Then it must be a high-ranking officer, or someone decorated at least. But if that were the case, there should be more familiar faces in the crowd.

I don't understand it one bit. Tanya continues observing.

The key to these things is always the rank and file.

Setting aside the issue of what's in the casket, Tanya turns her gaze on the utterly normal soldiers. But the longer she watches them, the stronger the urge to avert her eyes grows.

Talk about out of sync!

I'm not claiming they need to be flawlessly goose-stepping or anything. But how is something this visually disconcerting allowed to happen during a ceremony in the rear? Considering the importance of appearances for the army, it's puzzling.

If a whiny military bureaucrat married to the regulations were present, they'd be ripping into this performance without a second of hesitation.

Not that I have any intention of having my troops abide by such a strict interpretation of military code, but if this is the state of the honor guard, I can confidently say the Salamander Kampfgruppe would perform much better.

Even a unit that hadn't had much etiquette training would be preferable.

"…What a mess." Tanya finds herself lamenting in spite of herself.

If you can't carry a single wounded comrade, you can't call yourself a soldier. Gasping under a casket carried by multiple people is entirely out of the question. Under normal circumstances, it would be difficult to believe that a group of properly trained soldiers carrying a casket could find it heavy.

Or perhaps it really did feel heavy—to these borderline malnourished fellows, it just might.

As Tanya continues to watch, something else becomes apparent.

All the pallbearers look rather pale and unwell. Are they mostly soldiers who were sent to the rear to recover from illness? Or perhaps with a golden wound? Watching them move, she can make out a slight wobble that could indicate a limp.

Aside from that, most of them appear to be rosy-cheeked young men.

Their relative sizes are a bit varied for an army that likes to choose honor guards of similar heights for a dignified appearance, but more than anything, they're unbelievably young.

Maybe it's just her, but they look like they could almost be cadets from the officer academy, or volunteers in their mid- to late teens.

"…I guess this is what you call distortion," Tanya murmurs quietly. She was talking to herself, but her superior seems to have heard her remark and found it appropriate.

"So you see it, too."

Seeing him apparently satisfied by her observation, Tanya nods slightly.

"Yes."

"…This, what you see in front of you, is the current situation we are facing," Rudersdorf whispers, having crouched down. "The unwell and the young carrying coffins. It's awful."

These boys look like they're really struggling under that coffin… How sad. It's a scene that embodies the dried-up human resources pool. For Tanya, it's about all she can do to endure the dizziness. Perhaps Rudersdorf feels the same way. He continues his lament in a quiet voice.

"And it speaks accurately to the Empire's fate. But that's from our point of view. Let's observe from a different angle." He pats Tanya's shoulder and rises. "Today, make sure you take a good look at people's faces."

As instructed, she runs her eyes over the venue, taking in the rows of anguished expressions. Perhaps they're grieving relatives? Friends of the dead?

Either way, if they're in the procession, they must have some connection to the deceased. It's only natural that people left behind would look upset. The death of someone close to you is always distressing.

The sorrowful air grows stagnant, and the muted sound of overflowing tears is audible. This is unmistakably a funeral procession.

But Tanya notes something else as well.

These grieving lamentations are only from those in the procession.

Even unconnected people coming and going in the capital superficially make way as a formality and bow their heads to be polite. But beneath that, you can sense a sort of disinterest. The civilians passing by convey a sense of hopeless familiarity with their every move.

It's clear at a glance. Their movements are smooth and even relaxed. A group of soldiers who appear to be off duty stiffen and perform slick salutes. If Tanya herself had been passing by on other business, she would have offered one with a silent prayer as well.

These repeated and perfected motions are nothing more than well-practiced manners at this point.

"…Ah, I get it now."

Grief has become commonplace here, as if it were just another part and parcel of being well-mannered in polite company.

It's fine to be sophisticated—as long as we aren't constantly holding ceremonies for war dead.

In peaceful Japan, any event that caused double-digit deaths in one day would be reported nonstop. Meanwhile in the imperial capital today, casualty numbers have lost all meaning.

The same applies to being informed that dozens are dying every single day. The best such a topic can do is incidentally come up in conversation and inspire the same level of interest as the weather. In the next moment, the conversation will shift to a rousing debate about substitute foods.

That's how far war has encroached on the fabric of society. For residents of the capital during the great war, caskets of war dead have long since become a normal part of daily life. Someone like Tanya, returning from the front where they don't have time to give each and every corpse a proper burial, finds the ceremony more unusual than the civilians.

This is a distorted sense of normalcy.

A broken peace where the abnormal has long since supplanted the normal.

The forward-most line has felt like a world of people whose rationality has been ground down by enemy heavy artillery, but…apparently, the madness has slithered its way into the rear as well and to a much greater degree than expected. The world's reason has been obliterated, and chaos is only growing.

"…There's something tragic about this."

With that remark from Tanya, Rudersdorf must have decided that he had shown her enough. He tersely says, "Let's go."

"…Yes, sir."

It's not necessary to push back through the crowd. A few slight bows to the smattering of people around them is enough to make a path. Regardless of how it is on the front, other areas are quite open.

As they leave the funeral venue, Rudersdorf maintains his silence.

He reaches into his pocket for a cigar, brings it up to his mouth, and puffs as he strides away.

His gait seems…irritated. He doesn't seem to notice that his stride is longer than Tanya's, either. In the end, she has to jog to keep up.

Some superior officers really don't pay attention to details like this…

Or maybe it's simply that they can't afford to care…

The former is no good for obvious reasons, but if someone who was normally considerate of these things has been forced to ignore it because circumstances don't allow for it…that's a much bigger problem.

Coming out onto Main Street and mingling with the pedestrian traffic, the general finally stops.

"How was it?"

A sudden question completely devoid of ornamentation.

"It forced me to acknowledge my lack of foresight and imagination… It's hard to believe we're in the rear. Has the imperial capital become purgatory?"

"Indeed. It's as you've seen with your own eyes. Colonel Uger mentioned it to me the other day, so I went to have a look. It was only then I finally realized."

"I feel the same way. I suppose seeing really is believing."

I've finally caught a glimpse of Uger's brilliant consensus-building skills in action.

Frankly, his planning is impeccable. Someone who doesn't go over someone's head to move them but forces them to comprehend intuitively. His

talent with people is a real treasure. I'm sure he'll go far.

I originally intended to knock him out of the running for promotions, but it seems he has the mettle to keep growing. Competing with someone like him would be a waste of energy, capital, and time. I'll try to stay on good terms with him instead.

At the same time, I belatedly realize that if such an outstanding individual is going out of his way to give Tanya a warning, it deserves more than a cursory examination.

"…So even those who died in battle can no longer affect public opinion?"

"Zettour would have something to say about death becoming ubiquitous."

The shock of total war is great. It must have necessitated a paradigm shift. But perhaps the immensity of it pushed society to numb its senses instead.

Mobilizing every last youth, the rationing system, the mass employment of women and girls in every service and industry, and a sea of corpses flowing from the front lines.

"I do think it's possible to find some hope in all this."

"What?"

"If they aren't seized by emotion, couldn't that mean that a proper discussion centered on logic and reason is possible?"

A wise thought if I do say so myself. It certainly feels as though Tanya just made a sharp observation.

Sadly, conversation is a tricky business.

"Colonel, are you an idiot?"

The exact opposite of the agreement I was expecting. It's a stinging retort.

"I—I beg your pardon, General. What do you mean?"

"You really are an idiot, then."

Being told off so bluffly is quite upsetting, even for me. Tanya maintains a polite smile, but her twitching lips definitely give it away for anyone who bothers looking closely.

"Are you that hopelessly ignorant of people's feelings? You're the typical example of someone who can conduct psychological warfare yet still can't comprehend the human heart."

"Sir?"

Faced with Tanya's incomprehension, Rudersdorf heaves an exasperated sigh. How…humiliating.

Tanya is extremely, utterly offended.

“Are you one of these morons who thinks of war as nothing more than people butchering one another? Use your head and figure out where you left your common sense behind. Once it passes a certain threshold, anger plateaus.”

As if they’re having a pleasant philosophical discussion, Rudersdorf smiles, his stern features unnaturally peaceful.

“True fury is marked by the strange calm that comes over someone after they’ve gone past their limits.”

Taking out another cigar and a lighter, he apparently intends to enjoy a brief pause. As the smoke puffs out from between his lips, the general seems as calm as ever…but his hands are shaking.

It would be one thing if I could believe it was simply due to age.

“While they can still scream, it’s different. While they can scream, they give it voice. Once people reach rock bottom and they stop crying out… How can I explain it?”

Though restrained by the basic training every soldier receives, a subtle expression crosses his face. Is that…fear? I want to dismiss the very idea, but there’s no other explanation.

Her superior and the operations officer who is de facto don of the General Staff is *frightened*? That’s the sort of thing that paralyzes the hearts of field officers like Tanya. This is a nightmare. I come close to sympathizing with people who mistakenly cling to supposedly higher beings in their moment of weakness.

If it weren’t for free will and my resolute, modern ego, these feelings of powerlessness probably would’ve driven me into the grasping hands of faith as well.

Luckily, the fraud’s trick has been revealed.

Tanya takes a deep breath. After waiting a moment to let the oxygen reach her brain, she shakes her head to clear it and regain a measure of calm.

“General, is that something we should be afraid of?”

“Afraid? …Hmm, I suppose we have to acknowledge that,” he mutters. “The explosive power of public opinion bottled up for so long—it’s like magma under extreme pressure… There really is something equally awe- and fear-inspiring about it.”

The way he’s talking about public opinion as if it were magma makes Tanya’s brow furrow. That said, it’s undeniable that lately I’ve had to accept

that the masses and public opinion are outside my areas of expertise.

Tanya herself is an ordinary, upstanding citizen, so it'd be nice if she could claim that she could represent public opinion, but…

Sadly, there are idiots out there.

Those imbeciles are beyond saving. And it would seem that they're more formidable than an individual of good sense like Tanya can imagine.

"So what you're saying, General, is that what appears to be peaceful in this world might actually be concealing something that's on the brink of blowing up?"

"Even gunpowder is stable until it explodes."

That sounds like something an artillery officer or field engineer would say. Those guys love making comments about how charming explosives are as long as they don't go off.

"Is that the same as feeling surprisingly calm while thinking, *I'm gonna kill you*?"

"…That may be the truth on the battlefield, but it has no place in discussions about important matters of state. It's the sort of outrageous thing someone who only knows the battlefield would say. A classic example of inflexible thinking. I'm disappointed in you."

For a moment, I'm not sure how to respond. I'd like to argue that I have a wealth of experience, but that would be a baseless claim.

Damn. Tanya freezes up, but for better or worse, Rudersdorf also looks puzzled and then pounds his hand.

"…Sorry, I take back everything I just said. Your lack of experience is self-evident."

"Excuse me?"

"It's true that the vast majority of your life has been spent in the army. I forgot who I was talking to. I must admit my criticism was inappropriate."

Much to my chagrin, the general is earnestly lowering his head in apology. Is he feigning politeness? Is he mocking me?

If he wants a counterargument, I have plenty.

That's why it's so hard for Tanya to swallow her protest. There's no way she can say any of those things. If he asks for an explanation, how could she possibly reply?

After all, Tanya "volunteered" for the army at the youngest possible age. As far as anyone in this world can tell, she has no other life experience to

speak of, not even nominally, and there's no way she could claim otherwise.

I have no idea how the general is interpreting Tanya's polite silence, but he seems to have come to a conclusion on his own. "If I compare it to the calm before an attack, you understand, right? All who remain are simply waiting for the whistle in the trenches, exhausted, their minds numb."

"In that analogy, when the peace finally comes to an end, it shatters in an instant."

Rudersdorf nods in acknowledgment and brings his cigar to his lips in discomfort. "When order is upheld, peace can be preserved. Without it, peace is impossible. It's the difference between having a thin layer of ice or not."

An imperial victory would be wonderful…or rather, it would be an achievement proportionate to the vast sacrifices. In other words, it's equal in price to the blood the Imperial Army has shed. That's fine if we're talking statements that say nothing at all.

Sadly, investment doesn't come with a guarantee that you'll recoup the principal.

This is a project that has lost sight of its definition of victory. The only ones who can hope for any success are scammers deceiving the stockholders. Even start-up press releases sound more promising than this.

The credit known as victory is now just bad debt.

It's so subpar, it can't be rated. Even specialists who don't fear the risk of investing in bad debt wouldn't be able to find a scrap of hope in this enterprise.

And the funniest part of all is that it's impossible to laugh at this absurd situation. What a nightmare this is turning out to be.

Perhaps humans are creatures who are fated to repeat that cycle. To my subjective memory, it feels like ages ago, but when was it that the U.S. messed up in the same way?

Those subprime mortgages—what a panic that was.

What says it all is how "average Americans" seemed to have decided as a group to take no interest in that abnormality. Truly unbelievable.

"…The illusion of plans. The fantasy of harmony and order. The way the future should be. General, this is an outrageous con."

"Con or whatever it is, a plan is a plan."

"The reason it's a con is that it's not going to work out, though."

"If our failure is exposed, it'll be impossible to escape disaster. As such,

our only choice is to keep fighting. After all, there's nothing to say that it won't trigger the detonation that will blow the Empire sky-high."

An explosion—that is, an unprecedented rampage.

Oh, he must be referring to what happens when you lose a war.

At the same time as I have that idle thought, the realist in me has some doubts. Would a country that has fought past the point of exhaustion have the energy for an explosion like that?

It's an open question whether humans will continue to cling to something that's been thoroughly broken beyond repair.

"I don't mean any disrespect, but…I do wonder what will really happen after we burn out. Depending on the situation and the timing, isn't it possible we end up quietly welcoming peace?"

"Have you joined the pack of dreamers drowning in daytime fantasies, too?"

Withering under his utterly disdainful tone and glare, Tanya is taken aback. She's neither an unprincipled defeatist nor an optimist.

Tanya speaks more forcefully to make her point. "No, General. It's merely my personal theory. Very simply, I'm just extrapolating what seems like a possible result we can expect following total war."

History certainly has precedents. There is no greater proof than reality. And actually, as far as Tanya is concerned, truth is stranger than fiction.

Make no mistake, the world truly is filled with real mysteries. That's what enables Tanya to argue with her superior officer by shooting a question back at him.

"I can't help but be skeptical. In a country that has fought down to the marrow in their bones, does the populace even have enough energy in reserve for an outburst?"

"Do you have any basis for claiming that?"

Of course I do.

The Empire of Japan.

When the people found out they lost, they were shocked beyond belief. There may have been a handful of exceptions at Atsugi, holdouts on the front lines, and a domestic campaign against Commies, but the majority embraced defeat.

The Third Reich.

In the ruins of their dreams of empire, utterly overwhelmed, they were

forced to confront defeat.

Or the Cretan War. Or the Soviet-Afghan War. Fighting so hard you run out of options means there is literally nothing to do but embrace defeat.

“Please take a look at the former Entente Alliance and the Principality of Dacia and how their will to resist differs from the Republic’s. The former two were bludgeoned completely into the ground while the latter, though defeated, retained the energy to resist.”

It’s no *élan vital*,[1] but morale can sometimes be a monster.

Whether people act recklessly or not is a mental issue. Psychological warfare deserves to be recognized at least a little bit.

“If they have any energy remaining, they’ll be liable to revolt again, perhaps more seriously this time.”

“It’s not as if you don’t know about our rampant partisan problem. They’re even popping up in Dacia these days. Under the circumstances, that sort of opinion seems rather bold.”

“Time is a medicine that relieves pain and memory loss—it seems to be a tonic for the troubled mind.”

Humans are frequently capable of forgetting the inconvenient.

Thanks to our handy brains, the French hold up their resistance myth, German people murmur about “good Germans,” and the British called their Empire “generous.” The Japanese turned into “victims of militarism,” while Americans have no doubt that their exceptionalism is real, kings of the hill.

But what is the reality?

“Fine. I can concede that there is the possibility of things concluding without a great upheaval. But, Colonel, there are too many issues with that scenario for us to accept that as the most likely outcome.”

When he points that out, I understand so well it makes me sick.

Defeat means literally being forced to accept peace. That’s not something the Empire is capable of enduring at present.

A gradual decline.

A quagmire.

A way forward that isn’t clear.

Despite these things being true, the Empire still boasts the ability to fight.

Considering its position in negotiations, there is too great a risk in failing to compete. If we let someone discover our weakness, we could end up in the

same position Germany found itself during World War I.

But then how can we resolve things? Is there some way to satisfactorily patch things up in every arena?

From the history I'm privy to, peace seems… Well, that's the shameful truth.

Even after decisive victory in the Russo-Japanese War, there were the Hibiya riots.

Looking at other historical precedents, rather than being dismayed and muted, people rioted in major opposition to the perfectly acceptable peace terms. Without a proper explanation that the public is willing to accept, that's what happens.

In the end, if we want to avoid chaos on the home front, we can't discount public opinion.

Luckily…the current political situation vis-à-vis popular sentiment isn't particularly awful. And the Empire's administrative organs are superior to that of any of our time-honored Communist rivals. With what some would call decisive and merciless oppression, the police force has achieved the virtual obliteration of organized dissent, so the fact is that our society's malcontents have been beaten and cornered for a while now.

But our opponents are Commies.

We definitely haven't eradicated all their cells. They are shockingly tenacious and resilient. There's no end in sight for this game of Whack-a-Mole. Reminds me of the east—argh.

"I realize it'll be a difficult challenge. It's a task on par with achieving victory in the east."

When you're looking for a soft-landing strategy while a hard landing keeps flickering in and out of view, it's pretty hard to stay calm and carry on.

Seeing how the world was forced to confront the Commie threat head-on after World War II, letting our guard down would be no different from contemplating suicide.

Let's be honest. This is a truly intimidating challenge. But Tanya speaks forcefully, incorporating her determination and will into her reply. "Nothing could be harder than attaining a peaceful, quiet conclusion to this war, but… we mustn't give up."

"Well said."

"Yes. We have to do this—for peace."

And for me.

We have to reestablish peace.

In my general vicinity, if nowhere else. I'm not asking for anything so ambitious as world peace. Achieving an environment where I can pursue my own future in safety would be plenty satisfying.

That environment requires peace.

"For peace, huh?"

"For peace in the Reich. For a tranquil Heimat. It's an extremely simple wish."

Soldiers are fans of peace by nature. Who could possibly better understand the value of peace more than soldiers during wartime?

"I didn't know you were such a fan of peace."

"Yes, sir, I'm a coward."

Tanya tells the truth as if it's a joke.

The reason he finds it out of character must be her combat record. She's been on the front lines for so long that it makes sense people would assume she enjoys it there.

But I'd much prefer working at the company headquarters.

And it was just recently that Lieutenant Colonel Uger's declaration of his humanity left quite an impression. I'd like to be thought of as a human commander, too.

"A recipient of the Silver Wings claiming to be a coward? You? I'm surprised, Colonel. This is starting to sound like a children's book."

"Will the General Staff Office publish it? I look forward to the royalties."

Her reply seems to have hit her superior's funny bone.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Royalties! Royalties, you say?" Rudersdorf laughs heartily, holding his belly, and then claps his hands. "Very well, Colonel."

"Huh?"

"It's a promise."

"What is, sir?"

*What are you talking about?* his smile seems to say. "Of course, we have to get out of this war alive first, but…once that's taken care of, I'll turn your confessional into a story for children. The General Staff will fund the whole thing—a picture book."

"Really? That sounds like misappropriation of government funds, sir."

Mixing public and private matters usually invites punishment no matter

the era, and war heroes are no exception. Even Scipio Africanus was lambasted for a family member's misuse of government money. Cato the Elder may have been great, but many others would have simply been remembered as Cato the Bozo.

"That much will be overlooked. I'll take it out of the propaganda budget. And for the all-important title—how about *The Cowardly Hero*?"

"It would be an incredible honor, sir."

Rudersdorf's smile says he thinks that's great. "Do your best to survive to the day the war ends. I'll make your secret shame public for all to see. There's no stopping me now, Colonel."

"Of course not." She smiles back. It's more beneficial at this juncture to be thought of like this rather than as a ball of courage or a mad dog that doesn't know when to quit. "I have to survive so I can fulfill my dream of living on royalties."

As long as work comes with proper compensation, it's a wonderful thing. But who am I to oppose receiving passive income without needing to put in any work?

The sobering rebound from a happy fantasy is rough. The more seductive the prospects, the greater the disappointment.

After parting with Rudersdorf, Tanya emits a sigh as she walks alone through the capital.

The gray imperial capital, city of the dead, and this strange lifestyle of clinging to broken normalcy… The situation here is beyond her understanding.

"…The tricky part is that we haven't lost yet."

There's one root cause for it.

Though we haven't won, we haven't lost, either—a bizarre state of limbo.

In reality, the eastern front is a nightmare. The Empire is already waist deep in a quagmire. Severe attrition, administrative chaos, and no exit strategy. That's the cause of this gradual yet evident decline.

Look in all the right places, and you'll be able to see the hourglass's sand flowing at an alarming rate.

But humans are blind creatures who only see what they want. A man is less often a *roseau pensant* than a zombie that pretends to be *pensant*.

The Reich is ruled by emotion and the weight of the dead.

I see that if you say, *I'm no zombie!* to a bunch of zombies, you'll obviously get bit. Everyone needs to become a zombie.

Wandering aimlessly past corner after corner, Tanya sighs again.

Being stripped of the officer's uniform that gives her purpose and direction is enough to elicit a stream of melancholy sighs.

"There are too many reasons to fear a pandemic, huh."

Zombie panic—it's a stereotypical development you might see in a Hollywood blockbuster.

But it's impossible to laugh off because this isn't fiction playing out on screen. Shockingly, this is reality. If we don't stop it in its tracks, the Empire is liable to become a great power that rots from the inside out.

Having thought that far, Tanya shakes her head. "It's too much for a mere lieutenant colonel to handle. I can mull it over as much as I want, but I haven't even figured out the puzzle I'm already working on."

It's one thing to be proud of your abilities, but you'll trip yourself up if you get arrogant and overestimate what you're capable of.

Even with the career she has built, Tanya isn't much more than a handy tool for the General Staff. Like a capable field team being given preferential treatment at the main office. You may be a reliable hand or foot, but you're still just an extremity.

Hands and feet aren't allowed to think for themselves.

"That said, I can't just give up."

When the brain is mistaken, there's no reason the extremities should be able to escape unscathed.

Rather, it's the opposite. Some utter idiot has forgotten to wear his diaper, and it's the job of the hands to get him into one. Hands and feet are frequently forced to clean up after stupid brains. And it's not uncommon that the brain only becomes aware of its predicament because the hands and feet are rotting.

"Haaah," Tanya sighs and shakes her head. "I guess I just have to keep coaxing the brass."

I shouldn't get too caught up in body metaphors. Even the hands and feet I'm talking about are, in reality, made up of individuals who can think and speak for themselves.

There's no rule that says we can't think for ourselves.

What can be done to improve the situation? Thinking seriously about the

possibilities, the presence of wise, influential leaders like Lieutenant General Rudersdorf and Lieutenant General Zettour are like shining stars. The expansion of their influence should have a beneficial effect on the war situation.

It would seem at a glance that a helpful first step toward a solution, then, would be to serve them above and beyond what my responsibilities dictate.

"But that would very much be the first step toward forming a military faction. An army that becomes a party and wages political war? No matter how you look it, it's a recipe for disaster."

An instrument of violence.

An army always has that aspect to it. Without proper oversight, a tool designed for violence can easily spin out of control.

No matter how just the objective, any negligence inevitably leads to tragedy.

Tanya has no interest in getting mixed up in a future like that.

If you know a storm is coming, you take appropriate precautions. Emergency evacuation. Fleeing is surely a natural right of any human being.

"Though it's not my style…"

*What about requesting asylum?*

The thoughts that Tanya can't risk saying aloud get entertained privately for a moment.

It's like switching jobs. It feels as if the residents of the capital going by are watching her, but it's time to take stock of the overall situation.

The Empire is a sinking ship.

To use an airplane metaphor, it's like there's an intoxicated amateur in the cockpit. At a glance, the plane seems to be flying stably due to autopilot, but there's no guarantee of a safe landing.

If you have a parachute, jumping is a real option that should be considered.

But diving hastily in a panic would only be wringing your own neck.

When job hunting, it's only natural to stay in your current position until you know where you're going. If you're transferring from a big-name company, your weaknesses aren't likely to be visible, but if you're looking for a job with no work, you'll notice them treating you differently.

I may not look it, but I used to work in HR. I know exactly how these things go.

Someone who's used to getting the best terms is likely to continue to receive excellent compensation, if poached, while someone who was treated well *before they were sacked* frequently finds their market value lower than before.

Things might be different for people in a skilled occupation, like doctors or engineers, but…Tanya's military career isn't one of those highly specialized ones. The highest education she's ever attained was at the Empire's war college. It's extremely doubtful the diploma would even be recognized overseas.

Her prospects for finding work after seeking asylum are dismal. She doesn't even have any connections she could rely on if she had to switch careers.

"Maybe I should have taken a high-ranking official prisoner."

If Tanya had captured a VIP who was worthy of a prisoner exchange, she could have forged some connections. Practically everyone she knows is inside the Empire.

The foreign soldier she is closest with would probably be Ildoa's Colonel Calandro. But they're merely work acquaintances.

"Although he seems like a good person."

But that was all.

To be blunt, as far as Tanya can tell, it's only a matter of course that an officer attached to a frontline Kampfgruppe—and often involved in delicate matters, at that—is rated highly.

Calandro seems sort of like Lieutenant Colonel Uger, a man with good sense, but…

Tanya shakes her head. Unlike Uger, the man she attended war college with and whose family life she even knows about to some degree, she can't claim to know Calandro personally.

The best she can say is that he's a client she's familiar with. Yes, definitely not the type of connection she can quietly consult about a career change. Setting aside the idea of clinging to him *after* losing her job, her connection to him is too tenuous to try anything overt while still employed.

It's important to have some stability at turning points in life. It's because the fog is thick that we need to be well insured.

"Do I keep up appearances on a sinking ship? Or do I hang on for dear life while exploring a career change?"

Both options are awful.

I'm the restructurer. I never dreamed I'd be worrying about getting laid off or changing careers. I prefer being on the side that gets to choose.

I can declare sincerely, with my whole heart, that this lifetime employment system of the army's makes even the practice of employing new grads while restricting the freedom of movement of labor look decent in comparison. The military system can eat shit.

Plus, in the army, "lifetime" really means from the time you sign up to the day you die in combat.

That devil Being X really had the nerve to land me into this situation. I never liked a thing about him to begin with, but…this is just too much.

If gods exist, then they left one hell of a villainous spirit to his own devices.

We should have taken the philosophers shouting that God was dead more seriously. Nietzsche, you were right.

[chapter]

# III

## Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

Nobody likes arguing with friends.

A diplomat from the Kingdom of Ildoa

# [chapter] III Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

**JULY 3, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL**

A stress management technique that lightens mental burdens by giving the brain adequate stimulation and rest. A practice assigned to people tasked in strenuous negotiations and even proactively recommended by the army. An advanced skill sometimes employed as an emergency measure in enclosed environments such as submarines in order to control the amount of carbon dioxide in the air.

We call it *sleep*.

Or in this case, it's more accurately described as sulking in bed. The state of the imperial capital that Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff glimpsed yesterday is terribly unpleasant. After making her observations, she has chosen to secure some sleep in order to rest her mind.

When it comes to mental health, sleep is irreplaceable. After all, it's a chance to stop your brain from torturing itself with problems that can't be solved by thinking alone.

Thankfully, on leave in the capital, it's not difficult to get into a regular rhythm. And it's possible to savor a full eight hours of sleep. Or, at least, it should have been. After crawling into bed utterly exhausted to indulge in idle slumber, being dragged out of that bliss is the absolute worst thing that can possibly happen.

Not only that, but it's the duty officer, First Lieutenant Serebryakov, who's shown up in the middle of the night, and when she sleepily puts the receiver to Tanya's ear, it's none other than the General Staff Office ordering her to report in as soon as possible. The General Staff Office calling her…at

this late hour, with this timing.

Even in this world with no cell phones, the summonses come mercilessly via landlines just as if they were your manager at work.

One word from her superiors and Tanya leaps out of bed, changes into her uniform, dashes into a car, and thinks as fast as she can while Serebryakov drives.

Perhaps due to low blood sugar, my thoughts are scattered and disjointed. But if the army is summoning Tanya this late at night while she's on leave, there must be a reason. It's now that I finally realize my throat is parched to the point of irritation.

If only I had a canteen… On the eastern front, I would've definitely had water. Apparently, being in the rear has made me soft.

Security is the greatest enemy, I suppose.

I need to get it together.

As those thoughts race through my mind, I'm mildly impressed by Serebryakov's ability to drive without issue through the city under a strict blackout order, her foot on the gas the whole way. We arrive in no time.

The night duty team must have been notified in advance.

Entrance procedures go smoothly, and Tanya is immediately hustled to the heart of the General Staff Office.

From what I can see along the way, the General Staff Office really does never sleep, just as the rumors say. But even so, it's a bit too busy. Even energy drink–powered corporate drones who work round the clock must get tired at some point.

The staff officers push aside their fatigue, but it shows in their faces. Or rather, their faces are locked into stiff Noh mask expressions, but their frustration oozes out in their behavior.

This can't be good. What's going on?

Unable to find an immediate explanation, I stay on high alert as we reach the office belonging to the source of this summons, Lieutenant General Rudersdorf.

"Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, reporting for duty, sir."

"…Thanks for coming, Colonel."

The displeased look on the general's face makes it easy to guess what the situation is. If nothing else, I'm certain it's bad news. The only question is what kind.

Luckily, the answer to that question is delivered without delay.

Without any forewarning, the general says, “Ildoa will only accommodate us under the condition that we disarm.”

His words are abrupt, but even Tanya with her slightly dulled sleepy head can grasp the issue in Rudersdorf’s disgusted comment.

An ally requesting an ally to disarm?

“That’s not a very funny joke to hear in the middle of the night.”

Rudersdorf nods as if to say, *Exactly*, but he doesn’t bother answering with a joke of his own. From the way he reaches for a cigar in irritation, she can see that this really has his hackles up.

“It’s about the plan to pull our troops out of the southern continent. We’ve been considering it for some time now. We’ve been negotiating with Ildoa to withdraw through their colonies and were making some progress on that front, but—”

“Apologies for interrupting, but have there been any changes to the situation?”

“Yes. They’ve changed radically.”

That’s the worst possible news we could get.

From the look on Rudersdorf’s face and his tone of voice, he must have been planning to route the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps home through Ildoa. While simultaneously emphasizing the imperial-Ildoa alliance to the other powers, they would pull their troops out of the southern continent. That was the gist of the deal currently being negotiated.

If that has fallen through, then it makes sense that the staff officers would forget their exhaustion in the blink of an eye. As if we didn’t have enough headaches already! If the delicate situation with Ildoa explodes, they’ll have to call up all the deceased staffers, too—no time for eternal rest when the situation is this dire.

“So the diplomatic message is that imperial troops are being refused entry to Ildoan territory?”

“That’s right. They’re claiming they’ll take them prisoner. Officially, we’re allies, right? Aren’t we? I’m pretty sure we’re allies.” His tone is filled with sarcasm as he makes a show of questioning his memory. “Why would an allied country take our troops prisoner? Isn’t that absurd, Colonel?”

Nodding silently, Tanya sympathizes with Rudersdorf’s indignation. Given Ildoa’s closeness to the Empire, this is an overreaction.

An outburst was completely justified.

Ildoa's actions could only be categorized as hostile. Rudersdorf raises a fist and slams it down onto his desk, barking in anger. "Honestly…this is ludicrous!"

One glimpse of the red smear on his fist would be enough for anyone to instantly understand how furious the general is.

"Truly, sir—it's truly unbelievable."

I suppose we have to consider all the options, including a military clash or even full-scale war against Ildoa. I don't think he would get so mad he would risk something as foolish as opening another front, but…the situation is rapidly entering the danger zone.

Rudersdorf's summoned me, the commander of a combat unit, in the middle of the night.

I want to say it can't be for what I think it is, and yet I can't dismiss the possibility. Like the reconnaissance orders we once received regarding the Federation. Will he cancel my leave and send us over the border to Ildoa?

Tanya breaks out in an uncomfortable sweat as those thoughts turn instinctively to her fate.

What is it going to be?

What will the order from on high be this time? As tension grips her body, Tanya swallows hard and focuses on her superior so as not to miss a single word or gesture.

It's hard to even breathe. What's going to happen next?

"We're going to have to give some thought to the Ildoa problem later."

Even after thinking over his words, Tanya freezes up. The context is so difficult to comprehend.

"Huh?"

It's pitiful even if I say so myself, but what slips out of Tanya's mouth is a pure vocalization of that confusion.

What did General von Rudersdorf just say?

"What is it, Colonel?"

"I, ummm…" Tanya shakes her head as she squeezes the words out. "I was convinced you had summoned me for an operation against Ildoa. I thought it would be a special attack order. In fact, I was nearly certain that you'd give orders to drop in for an immediate assault."

I had braced myself to go already.

I had even envisioned the worst possible future of being crammed into a V-1. I went so far as to imagine Schugel the fanatic popping out from behind the door at that very moment.

Because in the Empire we have the bad habit of carrying out the impossible the moment anyone says the word *necessity*.

"I'm not giving any outrageous orders to the Lergen Kampfgruppe during its rebuilding and reorganization period. Even I, though perhaps not to the extent that General Zettour does, realize there are limits."

"I'm very sorry to have assumed."

"Oh, if that's as bad as my reputation is, it's no problem. You're not completely off the mark anyhow."

"Sir?"

I had only just started to relax when alarms started going off again in the back of my head. I can't get a good read on the situation, but I can only assume that he's planning to have me do something extremely unpleasant.

"I'm not asking anything outrageous of the Lergen Kampfgruppe. Unfortunately, under the circumstances, their condition isn't likely to change. But I heard that the core mage unit is in fine shape."

It only takes a moment for resignation to seep into Tanya.

More than anything else, a Kampfgruppe is highly flexible. The different components are organically bound into a cohesive unit but can be attached or detached as necessary, resulting in a level of adaptability you can't get with a normal formation.

That's a benefit that Tanya herself emphasized when pushing for the Kampfgruppe concept.

Each arm of the Kampfgruppe retains a degree of autonomous combat ability. If requested to take part in an operation as a detachment, Tanya has no real basis to refuse, and in any case, opposing the General Staff Office would basically be suicide.

She'll take the order obediently and devote herself to carrying it out.

"…I see why you called me here."

"Great, that'll make this quick. Colonel, I'm going to have you…do a bit of a backbend for me."

Of course you are! I mean, you're always asking me to do the impossible. Could you spare a thought for how we feel in the field? Of course, those candid remarks and complaints never make it to Tanya's mouth.

That kind of back talk doesn't improve Tanya's situation and would only harm her energy and social standing. Not that bottling it up is good for mental health, but…

Damn it all to hell. I want a new job. Seriously.

I want a contact in the Unified States. I need to look for a way to get in touch with someone.

"I need you to rescue the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps. The idea is very simple. We're going to persuade the Commonwealth's naval fleet to withdraw from the Inner Sea. We're calling it Operation Bárbaroi. I look forward to your success."

"Yes, sir! I'll do my best!"

Tanya's reply is crisp and clear. Like it should be at work. With the practiced motions she learned in training, she responds to her orders with a sharp salute.

In other words, she does her job.

It's exactly like retail workers who smile and say, *It's my pleasure!* regardless of how they actually feel. Similarly, Tanya doesn't make all that much or get any special treatment. This has got to be a violation of labor standards somewhere.

## THE SAME DAY, THE COMMONWEALTH, LONDINIUM, A MEETING ROOM IN WHITE HALL

"Next topic, then. On the southern continent, the Imperial Army is beginning to show signs that it's planning to pull out."

The report from the Intelligence agent was a new development. To be more specific, it was the type of report one didn't hear very often. To those at the meeting, this was the first piece of good news in quite a while.

Someone nodded in satisfaction as if to say, *Finally!*

"That took long enough. I couldn't stand those damn vermin."

"They're giving the broken record from the Free Republic a run for its money."

The gentlemen in attendance were all key Commonwealth planners. At

the same time, they were human. When favorable news arrives, even the tensest of groups tend to relax a little.

"The imperials and Republicans both make my head hurt."

The grievances these gentlemen uttered were filled with resentment on the order of *We've suffered so much!* Each enjoying a cigar or tea as he pleased, they may have been putting on airs, but they were also expressing heartfelt relief.

"The Empire's our true enemy, sure, but those Free Republic guys—or whatever they call themselves—they shove all the combat onto us and then think they can come back and claim victory when it's all over."

"Between the Republic and the Federation, we really are blessed with amazing friends."

"We have the colonists, too, don't we? They're great friends."

A light conversation full of jests coated in biting sarcasm. This was a masterful example of the John Bull way of saying the opposite of what one thinks. What might've appeared to be a counterpoint was really just joining in on the same complaint.

"Those traitors sometimes called colonists are never willing to shed any blood. And they're the best friend we civilized servants of His Majesty the King can claim? How far our great nation has fallen."

His words were harsh, but it was how many in the Commonwealth really felt. The Unified States were a great bunch of colonials. They clearly followed one of the beloved traditions of the Commonwealth—achieving their goals without spilling a drop of their own blood.

It was fine and dandy that they were supporting the war effort.

But the fact that the Unified States claimed neutrality and then tried to take all the juiciest bits for themselves was on par with how the Federation and Free Republic behaved.

They could try to pretend otherwise, but their intentions were obvious.

The prime minister scowled around the table and said, "It's vexing, but we can't just sit here feeling sorry for ourselves. Let's get to work, gentlemen."

At the prime minister's urging to get on with it, the army liaison refocused and began outlining the contents of the intelligence report.

"The Imperial Army appears to be moving with the intent to pull out. Their Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps has virtually ceased

operations already."

The prime minister nodded that that was good. That said, he couldn't accept it unconditionally. He shook his head lightly and inquired about his fear. "That's great if true, but saying they only *appear* to be moving with the intent to pull out means you can't say for sure?"

"Our recon-in-force operation was repelled, so we can't be certain. But they don't show any signs of preparing for an offensive."

"Wait a moment," said the prime minister, waving his hands before voicing his doubt. "These fellows are clever. Couldn't they simply be secretly gathering their forces for their next attack?"

"No, Prime Minister. According to our informant at the port, the heavy equipment is stockpiled, but every indication points to them preparing to send it to the rear. We've confirmed that some of their armored forces have already been sent back."

They would never send tanks back to the home country before an invasion. That was a clear signal. It could even be considered definitive. "Good." The prime minister accepted the army's view.

Thus, they arrived at one consensus. After a lot of drama, their headache over the situation on the southern continent would soon be in the past.

The tide was turning in the Commonwealth's favor.

"General Romel was outstanding as a tactician."

"He's a fine man. But he can't hack it when it comes to strategy. In the end, he's just a lieutenant general."

It was because they felt assured of their superior position that they could praise him backhandedly with a snicker.

Their remarks akin to boasting about the health of their prey merged with their fondness of foxhunting to create the atmosphere of a salon party.

An enemy commander, no matter how outstanding, would always be the target of criticism and ridicule for these men. Of course, their sneers were just as often directed at one another.

"The army seems to have had its hands full with him, though." The stinging comment was launched at a man in uniform by a man in a suit.

"It sure dragged on. He must have been outstanding…because if he weren't, how could we put up with this situation?"

As the civilians silently judged the army's apparent failure, a man wearing a proper general's rank stood to defend them. "I'm sure our enemy's

excellence will be noted in the history books. General Romel fought a magnificent maneuver battle. And we can leave a great many lessons to history. This has been a great example of showing courage in the face of a lion despite whatever restraints politicians may have placed on the armed forces." The soldier continued in a fed-up tone. "During a phase that should have been handled with strategy, we were forced to contend with a brilliant tactician on a purely tactical level. Elite military men don't like dancing on the stage their enemy sets. I think it'll be a great historical lesson in military-civil relations."

The politicians looked miffed, but the members of the army thought the snark was justified.

If the home country refused to keep pace with the Free Republic and didn't provide enough troops but then turned around to criticize the military's "defeat," who wouldn't frown?

The staring contest between the civilians and the military officers came down to the fact that they were John Bulls who shared a language of sarcasm and snark at their roots.

There was nothing fun about studying one another's faces. At least, the majority of them felt there were better ways to spend their time.

For example, figuring out how to best foil the hated imperials.

"Then shall we perform one of our specialties for this outstanding imperial officer?"

"He's scored a lot of points. We need to make a big comeback to clinch this game."

Everyone nodded in agreement. Continuing to lose would only endanger a gentleman's reputation.

"Our turn isn't over yet. Trying to abandon the game halfway to sneak away with a win is outrageous. We can't allow it."

The smart comment caused several of the men to chuckle to themselves with a grin.

All's fair in love and war. The enemies so dear to them that they wanted to murder them were running away with their tails between their legs. There was no reason to let them make a triumphant return to their home country.

On the contrary, the Commonwealth should throw them a party to *see them off*.

"So what, then? Are they retreating through Ildoa?"

“No, our ambassador has done a fine job. Ildoa has promised to stay staunchly neutral.”

“Oh-ho.” They unconsciously began to smile more broadly.

Without Ildoa as a shield and mediator, the Empire had little hope of securing safe passage out on the Inner Sea. Those were Commonwealth waters.

That was a clear win for the Foreign Office.

As long as the Royal Navy had command of the water, the Commonwealth, ruler of the oceans, would never allow a leisurely imperial withdrawal.

“That means the Empire has the choice to surrender to us or Ildoa. Well, I’m sure they’ll opt to flee into the Ildoan colonies.”

That amused comment clearly indicated that there wasn’t much of a future in that direction. If he had a bit more imagination, he would have been able to grasp the fact that Ildoans were also currently burdened by the imperial troops. The Ildoans, flitting like a bat between two sides, probably didn’t want to deal with the Imperial Army, whether in its colonies or at home. It was fine for the Commonwealth and the Empire to snap at each other, but Ildoa didn’t want to personally get involved. The calculations of a neutral country were based purely on reason and logic.

Compared to the Federation or the Empire, who were impossible to read, the Commonwealth felt almost friendly toward the opportunistic Ildoa. That is, it was similar to how they felt about the colonists.

Knowing what is on someone’s mind is a very good thing.

“Wonderful! So their fate is sealed. If possible, I’d like them to be our guests instead of Ildoa’s.”

The mood in the room turned into one of eager anticipation of an imminent triumph.

But pessimism and sarcasm were a core part of these men’s characters. For better or worse, they readily conjured up visions of worst-case scenarios.

“But what if they take a third route?”

“Which would be?”

“If they forcibly withdrew. Imperials tend to be pushy. They’re sure to try to get their way.”

On the topic of imperial manners, these gentlemen, cigars in hand, could only wince.

Imperials continually proved how capable they were when it came to barbarism such as kicking in tightly locked doors.

"Knowing them, they probably will."

There was an air of deep sympathy.

These were the kind of fellows who were incapable of saying please and asking for the door to be opened. Since the Empire's founding, they'd done nothing but swing their fists. Were they capable of even thinking about offering a handshake? No, probably not.

So to open the door, they would go as far as to kick it in. In a pinch, they might even employ an ax or fire.

But that was on land. On water, the landlubber imperials would first need swimming lessons. They would have to learn how to open their fists and do the trudgen stroke.

"Let's give them a pleasant tour of the great big sea. Expect the cost to equal the amount of shells it will take to sink every last one of them. I ask our honorable Exchequer to please tolerate this expense."

The navy may have been raring to go, but the civilian side was still skeptical. The officer serving the Exchequer, in particular, had some arguments.

"We'd gladly sign such a delightful invoice, even if we can already see the bill coming; however, is it really possible to stop them?"

"What are you implying?"

"Even a nation focused on its land army is sure to scrape together some sort of escort. What is the strength of our fleet?"

After being challenged and asked if they were absolutely sure, the navy reluctantly responded. "The truth is, it's rather limited at the moment…but we have a squadron including a cruiser on standby. We're not about to lose a naval battle to those potatoes."

"Limited?" That was news to the Exchequer officer, who would usually be the one imposing the limits with budgetary measures, and he wore his doubt openly on his face.

The navy representative shot a glance at the prime minister before reluctantly replying. "Actually, we're rather busy supporting the Federation…and there's going to be another sneak attack on imperial-controlled territory by water."

Everyone present recalled the naval operation that they had tried before

and frowned.

How did it go last time? It was an unmitigated disaster. The precious troops deployed for political expediency included air forces that were still in the process of being rebuilt. They hurled young Commonwealth soldiers like eggs at the thick walls of the Empire, all in the name of aiding the Communists.

Of course, they did achieve *something*. The strategic objective of preventing the Empire from concentrating forces in the east was achieved. But the price they paid was exorbitant.

*This again?* Under that silent pressure, the military side quickly continued its explanation.

"It's not going to be a carrier strike group making an all-out assault on the imperial mainland. This time we're taking a tighter, more efficient approach."

"Which means? What are you getting at?"

"A small-scale special operation, a feint, and a narrowly defined tactical objective. It's elaborate, but the number of forces we're committing isn't huge."

*That's your whole explanation?* said the looks they were getting. The prime minister, who had been informed of the plan ahead of time, puffed his cigar as he gave the military a hand.

"It's fine to tell them a bit more."

"Very good, Prime Minister." Sending him a thank-you with his eyes, the naval officer began to speak, choosing his words carefully. "What we're planning is a diversion on the Inner Sea. By performing a limited assault into a delicate area near the Ildoan border, we aim to increase the strain on imperial forces."

The main purpose of the proposal he roughly outlined was simply a strategic feint.

It was harassment that would make the Imperial Army's limited resources even more scarce by forcing them to respond.

The core of this plan was the mindset of taking the initiative to do the last thing their enemies wanted—a way of thinking that was extremely similar to imperial Magic Officer Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff's.

"I don't enjoy sending our youths to die for the Communists."

"To be frank, I agree with you. But this assault operation will also achieve one of our strategic objectives. With that in mind, the main target of the

attack is an Inner Sea port facility in former Republic territory that has been captured by the Empire. We'll hit a maintenance base that could very well be servicing submarines. The idea is that at the same time, a special operations mission will be undertaken by a composite Commonwealth–Free Republic commando group."

"Is the Free Republic on board with that?"

"Retaking a piece of their homeland seems to be ample motivation to get them moving. They agreed to send four commando companies. If we match that amount, we'll have enough forces to strike in two or three locations simultaneously."

Reassuring everyone that it wouldn't be just them risking their troops, the naval officers once again emphasized that it would be a relatively lightweight operation.

"Please understand if I don't reveal the exact targets. But we can expect to get some significant intel from all this. Even if we do incur heavy casualties…we'll at least have fulfilled our obligations to the Federation."

"Great. Though it goes without saying that I hope we succeed."

As agreement and praise spread around the table, one group of people looked apprehensive as they chimed in. "One last thing from the Foreign Office. If we're carrying out an operation by the Inner Sea, we'll be operating right next to Ildoa. Should we shore them up?"

In response to the diplomat's question, the prime minster gave an ever-so-John Bullish answer. "Eh, I imagine it's fine."

"Sir?"

"Gentlemen, why don't we let the weathercock decide something for once? We can always unfurl our sails to catch the wind after seeing what move they make."

## THE SAME DAY, AFTERNOON

Strangely enough, the heads of both countries came to almost identical conclusions at the same time.

It's a problem of face.

Don’t laugh as if it’s absurd. A nation’s reputation and its authority are one and the same. And authority is what enables some countries to force other countries to do what they want.

Even something as trivial as appearances becomes a matter of geopolitics when the state gets involved.

The knowledgeable, cultured representatives hurl their decent sensibilities in the trash that moment and turn into arrogant tyrants roaring strict orders. “Win at all costs. Whatever it takes, no matter what happens, you must!”

When political circumstances transform into political requests, endless demands are inevitably placed on the army; in other words, orders that make the people doing the actual work groan.

They don’t have the composure to pay any heed to the likes of Tanya von Degurechaff, a mere lieutenant colonel laboring in the field. What do medals from the eastern front or even the Silver Wings Assault Badge mean in the face of a nation’s geopolitical concerns?

So it is that this poor pawn of the Empire, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff, is stuck giving her troops a briefing with a heavy heart.

*Assemble, attention, begin.*

Tanya begins telling her troops the plain truth.

“The Lergen Kampfgruppe will be reorganizing with Colonel Lergen.”

The well-known facts.

As the General Staff promised, the Lergen Kampfgruppe is getting a proper leave. If there’s any exception, it’s the flying squad that reports directly to General Staff HQ—the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion.

We’re an air unit, so they make us go flying everywhere. Is that how it works?

“But never you fear, my dear troops. Luckily, we don’t need to worry about being out of work. We’ve been given a side job.”

A deceptive smile on her face, Tanya even ventures to chuckle. “Look, the General Staff doesn’t want us to be salary thieves. It’s quite considerate of them.”

“A sympathy mission?”

There is something so funny about the way First Lieutenant Serebryakov asks this, a puzzled look on her face. “Sympathy mission”—has a nice ring to it. Although I’d rather be given a sympathy budget.

On second thought, it’s more pleasant to be here on the defending side

rather than fighting on the front lines—that's for sure.

"Okay, I'll explain our very simple job. It's called Operation Bárbaroi. Though the name is the exact opposite of the mission."

She whacks her pointer into the map on the board.

"We pretend to be a travel agency."

It's a homecoming support mission. We get rid of anyone trying to mess up the trip. That's the nuance Tanya imparts.

"We're bringing General Romel home. Extremely simple, no?"

""""Huh?!""""

Since her subordinates don't seem to have grasped the concept, Tanya breaks it down for them.

"It's a mission to escort the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps back to the home country. Don't forget to bring a welcome bouquet." Waving her hands, she adds a bit of pep to her voice. "It's quite a civilized mission, don't you think? We get to welcome our brothers-in-arms who have been fighting down south back to the Heimat. Make sure we have plenty of beer and bratwurst so they can eat as much as they like."

The troops raise a hearty "gah-ha-ha-ha" like usual. But the laughter doesn't last long. With another whap of her pointer, Tanya stares her troops down.

"There's just one little problem. It's not a big deal, though; relax and hear me out." She maintains the light mood.

To the battle-worn vets, however, the word *problem* gets a reaction with the same level of reliability as Pavlov's bell. Just like the classic example of conditioned reflexes, the laughing soldiers look like they're about to start drooling.

These crazy war nuts.

"Apparently, unlike me, the general is very popular."

The victim of stalking.

But though Tanya has been in this world a long time, there's still an insurmountable cultural wall between her, a civilized individual, and these war nuts.

The reaction of her subordinates can roughly be described as *confusion*. Apparently, these blank-faced guys don't get it.

Major Weiss speaks as their representative. "So what exactly will we be doing, ma'am?"

“It’s simple.” She gives her vice commander an amused smile. “He has crazy fans who will say, *Oh, please don’t go. Stay with us*. It’s almost guaranteed that a few will try to hold him back and keep him from leaving.”

You could even call them fully armed stalkers. What a terribly frightening bunch.

I’d love to call the cops and let the justice system deal with them, but given how heavily armed they are, I think this is rightly a job for the army rather than the police.

In other words, it’s a job for our very own fully armed ruffians.

“This is just the worst possible development, huh? A final farewell to those shitty fans featuring a hail of lead.”

“Ah, so it’s just like the eastern front, then.”

Tanya nods at her adjutant’s remark. She’s exactly right. When explaining things to others, it’s always easiest for them to understand if you can use something familiar as a metaphor.

But to think that the closest comparison is the front line in the east!

“I daresay you’re right, Lieutenant Serebryakov. It’s just like the eastern front.”

What a downright awful reality.

Right when we think we’ve finally gotten away from the eastern front, we get sent to the damn southern one. The higher-ups must have gotten it in their heads that I’m the type of girl who’ll do anything to please.

I guess I really need to lodge a formal complaint to someone about improving labor conditions.

Honestly, I’ve bravely fought with all my might, and I was awarded a medal on the eastern front for it. Even if my fighting spirit is in question, shouldn’t I be able to use all my achievements as a shield and demand, *Practice what you preach!*?

In any era, it’s always the useless who make the most noise. And incompetence often has a greater impact than any number of achievements. That warrants consideration.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to get some peace and quiet? Even the cool kids want some time to themselves. Don’t you think so, Lieutenant Serebryakov?”

“Yes, Colonel. We’re too popular.”

“Instead of signed photographs, we’ll give out bullets. Soon our way of doing things will be in vogue all around the world! Now, then.” Tanya

straightens up. “It’s all fine and good to be fussed over and get a chip on our shoulder, but let’s do this properly. I’m going to explain what sort of enemies we’ll be up against.” She names the main targets explicitly. “Most of those trying to stop them will be from the Commonwealth. Oh, and there might be some guys from the Free Republic tagging along to cause trouble. And the Ildoans also seem to have…feelings about all this.”

Just about all the Inner Sea powers are both against the Empire and “staunchly neutral.” Just fantastic.

If that weren’t the case, our forces would have been able to escape to the Ildoan colonies. If Ildoa is shutting down that avenue of retreat, then the only way out is to forcibly open a path over the water.

Traveling by sea has been a great option since ancient times, but sadly… the most celebrated maritime transport in the Empire’s history has nearly always been commercial, not military.

And due to historical considerations for dear Ildoa, the Empire has a puny naval presence in the Inner Sea—the Commonwealth’s fleet plus the dregs of the Republic’s will be too much for them to handle.

Times like these, you’d like to depend on your ally, according to the stipulations of agreed-upon treaties, but apparently they’re mysteriously “neutral.”

What kind of ally is that?

“…And so, it’s our job to single-handedly handle all these passionate fans. We’ll send those sons of bitches to hell right before the Ildoans’ eyes.”

We must demonstrate in no unclear terms to our fair-weather friend what the consequences of fence-sitting can be.

The appropriate application of violence can, depending on the time and place, guarantee faith with a single word: *redline*.

“Complicating things is the fact that our aim is only to support the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps’ withdrawal. I’ll be straight with you. Our enemy is a naval fleet. This will be a new kind of fight for us.”

When Tanya has said that much, a hand goes up with a question. It’s not as if they’re going in order of rank, but Weiss is the first to cut in, seeming perplexed.

“If the objective is to rescue our fellow troops, then the mission doesn’t change, right?”

“That’s a good observation, Major Weiss. But the nature of it is different.”

“Ma’am?”

That is undoubtedly both the point and the biggest issue.

“It bears repeating that the main enemy force is going to be a fleet.”

She purposely emphasizes the word *fleet* wearing a grim expression. A good explanation of the situation will always include a clear indication of what the commander thinks troops need to watch out for.

“Problematically, we have to face the fact that the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is not particularly amazing at maritime engagements.”

“Uhhh, this is us we’re talking about. Aren’t we relatively decent?”

“Major Weiss, take a good long look at reality. You’re awarding us too many points. We have to accept that we don’t perform as well over water as over land.”

Come to think of it, the only time we got passing grades in a joint naval operation was during a mission to attack targets on land. When the combat is against warships, we just barely scrape by with a bunch of red pen marks.

On top of that, we don’t have much experience. We’ve been fighting on the eastern front all this time. That makes us a unit with plenty of combat time, but it has the unfortunate effect of giving us a marked specialization in a single type of environment.

To be blunt, running the same kind of operation over and over again can cause Galápagos syndrome.

It’s been a long time since the 203rd has fought against a naval fleet. For a unit acclimatized to the swamp of the eastern front, the prospect of the sea is plenty cause for anxiety.

“We’re facing a bitter truth, troops. Considering how maritime battles up in Norden and to the north went, I’m forced to admit that water is our weakness.”

So we need to overcome that weakness.

“Regardless of whether the replacements participate in the mission or not…this is a good time for supplemental navigation lessons.”

Having that little bit of extra knowledge can make a big difference. That’s the importance of education.

“All of us have some degree of experience fighting against marine mages. But don’t underestimate them. I imagine some of you have your guard down after the Commonwealth fighters we’ve been encountering on the eastern front.”

People with experience often fail because they rely too heavily on their experience.

Half-complete knowledge is the most dangerous kind. You think you know something you don't, and as a result, you lose the humility of total ignorance.

"We'll be facing warriors who are basically natives of the sea. If we're going to their home turf, that makes us the away team. Prepare yourselves accordingly."

A different environment naturally yields different results. That obvious truth is often hidden by experiential bias.

A change in the situation necessitates a change in your understanding of the truth experience taught you. But the more serious the student, the more tightly they stick to what they were taught at school.

In the end, it comes down to lifelong learning.

"Now then, we have an opportunity to better comprehend our mission based on its environment. We may simply be providing support for the withdrawal, but conducting our operation over water is going to be a totally different ball game."

Tanya emphasizes and reemphasizes. Being thought of as an obnoxious commander is better than the possibility of losing her meat shields. What's required here is careful management.

"We must accomplish both the mission of cleaning up the sea route and escorting the transport ships. Make sure you take the difference in environment to heart."

"Wouldn't it be safer for them to just stay put?"

"That's a valid opinion, Lieutenant Grantz. If you and Lieutenant Tospan were there, you could give the order to defend to the death and what would be would be, but this is General Romel we're talking about. He isn't one to sit back and do nothing."

"Ah, right." The officers smiled, remembering. That general could die and still be impatient. He's the type to strike first with a firm resolve no matter what the scenario.

"I'm sure you're right. Given a pile of stones, he's far less likely to build a wall than to throw them at the enemy."

"Whoa, hold on, Major. Have you forgotten everything? There aren't any stones to speak of in that nostalgic desert."

“Ha-ha-ha!”

Of the veterans, those mages who were there on the Rhine had been to the southern continent before getting sent to the eastern front.

Covered in sand, plastered in mud—we haven’t gotten very far from playing in the dirt as children. Oh, how war corrodes our humanity. The ludicrousness of bringing iron and blood into games of jumping in mud puddles.

“All right, troops. That’s it from me. We’re headed south. Make sure your snack stash will be able to withstand the heat. Don’t come whining to me if your chocolate melts and you end up with an insect problem.” She claps her hands to signal an end to her explanation. “Any questions?”

A hand goes up. Surprisingly, it’s Grantz starting things off again. “Could you please tell us the estimated fleet strength on each side?”

He thoughtfully adds that whatever she does know is fine, and Tanya shrugs. “It’s not like it’s a big secret.”

“Ma’am?”

“Lieutenant Grantz, I’ll give it to you point-blank. The disparity in naval power is hopeless.”

A maritime nation versus a continental nation.

As a continental nation that has no choice but to prioritize the land forces, from a cost-performance point of view, taking on a maritime nation’s navy is impossible.

It’s entirely too obvious, logically.

“I’m not in a position to know how our naval forces are deployed, but are you saying we can’t rely on the presence of escort groups like the enemy has been doing?”

Grantz wonders aloud, but why doesn’t he realize? It’s something he would understand if he thought for a moment, so she nearly gets upset with him.

“Absolutely not. Can you take a hint?”

“Sorry, Colonel. I don’t really know much about the navy…”

*Somebody please explain it to him…* I nearly say that out loud before I realize something.

Grantz is one of the rare academy graduates in the battalion. Even counting Serebryakov, who went through the accelerated curriculum, graduates are rare. No wonder they don’t know about the sea!

"Major Weiss, give them some supplementary lessons later."

"…Er, I'm terribly sorry to ask, but I could also use an explanation."

"What, you too?!"

Weiss can usually be counted on for his good sense, so if even he doesn't have a solid grasp of naval combat… Well, shit.

That makes Grantz's level of knowledge the average! "Haaah," Tanya sighs as she rummages through her memories.

What a horror overspecialization can be.

"Our navy has almost no ships it can send to the south."

Not zero.

But incredibly close to zero.

"What we have, apart from submarines, is a warship captured from the former Republic—just a cruiser that wasn't even seaworthy, forced out of the dry docks with outdated armor. What we do have barely counts as a surface fleet."

There were virtually no capital ships in the Imperial Navy.

If anything, I suppose you could count the pseudo-heavy cruiser with the 203 mm cannon? From the firepower standpoint alone, it's immediately clear how depressingly impossible a fleet engagement would be. If we can't match cannon strength, then we could make up for it with the tried-and-true night attack from underwater, except that our submarines have been having issues with their equipment.

Essentially, the hardest-working members of the Imperial Navy have very little good news to look forward to. The best those submariners can get is, *We've received torpedoes we can actually use!*

So it's easy to imagine the quality of our explosives.

The biggest headache of all is that we definitely don't even have enough destroyers knocking around the Inner Sea.

Thus, the conclusion is clear: The navy are a bunch of tax thieves.

Or at the very least, the commanders of the surface vessels down south are getting a lot of free lunches. Cut expenses on some of the port facilities and ship maintenance and send the difference to the eastern front, please.

"Regardless of how it would go if the Ildoan Navy joined our side of the fight, deploying the Imperial Navy is practically pointless."

It's true that there are diplomatic and historical elements at play here.

*The south for me; the north for you.* That's the summary of Ildoa's offer.

In the end, our wonderful friend Ildoa wanted the Imperial Navy to concentrate on dealing with the Commonwealth Home Fleet.

The Empire had little interest expanding south, and so a deal was struck.

What naval maintenance the Empire did do was focused on the High Seas Fleet. Of course, I don't think that choice was all bad. There was a point to it.

But given how much the Commonwealth's navy outstrips ours, I'm forced to admit that much of that effort backfired.

"To use a metaphor you'll recognize, our surface vessels down south are nothing but sitting ducks for the Commonwealth Navy. They're like the old Federation mage units."

Those good-for-nothing surface vessel commanders.

Eating lunch on the state's tab—hell, I wish I could do that. If possible, I'd like to receive a salary for no work and get cussed out as a freeloading magic officer.

Keeping that fury internalized, Tanya sighs. "That said, it's true that we can count on their anti-sub capabilities…meaning they'll be able to escort the boats, at least. But in terms of getting rid of the enemy's mainstay firepower…"

The magic major before me attempts to accurately estimate what the navy can do, and I reappraise him as a surprisingly fair person.

I've always been impressed with his remarkable work ethic. But…during wartime, the assessment that he's fair when competing with the navy for resources makes him a participant in the ideal marketplace.

"…I beg your pardon, ma'am, but can our battalion really assist in a withdrawal from the southern continent under these circumstances?"

"That's a very good question, Major Weiss. Actually, I wonder the same thing myself."

The most we can do is look out for submarines. Or if we have to fight ships, then our only real option is torching their superstructures with explosion or optical formulas. Even if we're ordered to sink the enemy warships, the limit of what we can accomplish is aiming for flammables that could cause secondary explosions.

Closing in for a boarding will be next to impossible unless the enemy marine mages oversleep and conveniently miss the battle.

That said, this isn't what I need to be thinking about.

"Apparently, there's an additional briefing from the General Staff." She

murmurs, “He should be here any minute,” and not a moment after she looks at her watch, her superior appears.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, troops.”

Standing in the door to the meeting room is a tired-looking Colonel Lergen.

“Greetings, Colonel Lergen!”

“At ease. Okay, let’s get right to it. This is about Operation Bárbaroi.”

As they exchange salutes, Colonel Lergen wastes not a moment before the officers, launching right into his explanation.

“Colonel Degurechaff.”

“Yes, sir.”

She has no idea what impossibility he has in store for her, but she knows it’s going to be awfully impossible.

“I need you to do the impossible.”

Correction.

This is just cruel.

Too cruel.

Worse than everything so far? More impossible than all that?

“At your service, sir.”

Sadly, Tanya von Degurechaff doesn’t occupy a social position that allows her to argue. Swallowing those thoughts, she silently waits for whatever is coming. The little difference between an adult and a soldier is the weight of the orders.

If a company mandates something, disobeying gets you fired, but in the army, the firing squad shows you the way out.

“I appreciate it.”

*What else am I supposed to say?*

“Your orders, sir?”

“I’m sorry.”

His sudden apology triggers urgent alarm bells in Tanya’s mind. The regrets of someone who, though a good individual, is a member of an evil organization are always the worst sort of omen.

*Then I’d prefer you didn’t say it…* Even swallowing the words that nearly make it out of her throat is painful.

“The Technical Arsenal has prepared a key that will unlock a few doors for us. I need you to insert it into the keyhole.”

"Huh?"

A key?

Prying a door open?

…I feel like I've heard this before.

"Wait, no!"

I was told the same thing during Operation Lock Pick.

*Open sesame.*

I'll never forget being flown into enemy territory inside a V-1 powered by hydrazine fuel. And I'll probably never forgive that, either.

That experience, my instincts—everything is ringing my alarm bells. I need to run.

But that resolve doesn't come fast enough.

"I'll have him personally explain."

Timed with Lergen's introduction, a tidy man pops his head into the room.

He approaches in an utterly normal way. No explosions, no booms, no strange noises. He wears a bright smile, and his manner is natural.

"Well, well, hello, troops."

He sounds so polite Tanya isn't sure at first who it is.

"Oh, Colonel Degurechaff. It's been quite a while."

"D-D-Doctor?!"

"The grace of God must have shone on your path as well. I'm glad to see you still in one piece."

He walks right over to her and clamps his hand around Tanya's. He squeezes so hard it hurts. He must mean it as a sort of handshake, but it feels more like a nightmare where I'm forced into a deal with the devil.

The strangely intense heat of Chief Engineer Schugel's hands is deeply unsettling. If it weren't for appearances, Tanya would immediately shake them off and then disinfect her hand and plunge it into ice water to rinse off.

"R-riiight."

"You don't need to tell everyone—don't worry. I understand your worries very well. You pray, wondering how you can protect all your compatriots, right?" He places a hand on his chest. "It'll be fine—just leave it to me. I've prepared the key. It's perfectly safe. Everything will go off without a hitch."

Urged to go with him, Tanya and the other magic officers are led to a certain

something with a cover thrown over it.

…This is the definition of déjà vu.

Back on the Rhine front…something very similar to this happened… Ahhh, damn it. I can literally see the future. The power of clairvoyance is mine for this one moment. I just know it.

"Follow me, everyone. It's just over here."

He whips the cover off and stands there with his head held high. In fact, he spreads his arms to make a proclamation. That ghastly expression, that creepy tenacity, and…something that makes Tanya shrink with a groan.

"Behold! This is it!"

Enshrined there is a huge…long cylinder. A torpedo. No matter how you look at it, that's one hundred percent a torpedo. And unless I'm seeing things, it's clearly equipped with a human-sized cockpit.

"This is the V-2. It's a truly revolutionary weapon!"

The doctor makes his every word drip with importance, and Tanya's enthusiasm is ground further and further down.

"It's wonderful! Honestly, I can't believe I've been given the opportunity to introduce something so wonderful to you all. With this, I am fully convinced of the Lord's blessings."

"Excuse me, but…this is…?"

"Yes, Colonel! I built this based on your feedback! Just as you requested, you can freely navigate to your destination!"

"What?"

"The V-1 went straight. It flew as true as my faith—in an unbroken, unyielding line! Luckily, the V-2 is made for confronting reality."

What is the doctor going on about? I feel bad about raining on his one-man parade, but Tanya is an extremely sane person.

Anyone will do, so please get us a mental health professional in here on the double. Not that a military salary is enough to make up for having to deal with blind faith and some form of delirium, but…

"All roads lead to sacred land, routes for gazing up at lofty ideals. That's what I aimed to re-create by equipping the V-2 with these new guidance capabilities. Just as you all are led unerringly by your faith, it will not stray!"

There isn't a shred of faith in my body, so can I go home now?

"In other words, this is the most perfect holy-guided torpedo. There could be nothing greater, Colonel!"

“Wonderful! Not to barrage you with questions, but the guidance is fully automatic, then, right?”

If so, how happy I’ll be.

Tanya’s question is intended to be malicious, but the fanatic scientist smiles back at her without so much as flinching. Ahhh, I would feel so much better if I could punch that sketchy face of his.

“Don’t worry, Colonel Degurechaff. I wouldn’t steal the thunder of someone I’ve prayed alongside! We’re fellow supplicants of God’s glory, are we not? You can believe in me.”

His words don’t offer even a micron of relief. Don’t look at me with that sick smile as if you understand!

“I’m just an officer of the Imperial Army.”

A roundabout denial. Sadly, these types don’t get the message no matter what you say. Schugel the engineer who would have understood that she means she’s a soldier, not a believer who is no longer with us.

The doctor, who has been brainwashed into unmatchable piety, won’t listen to what anyone says.

Tanya shakes her head. I don’t think he listened to anyone from the start.

“Just like the V-1, all you have to do is crash this into the enemy. And make your escape. You’ll get a great view of the plentiful explosives on board blowing up whatever problem is facing you.”

So we’ll be human torpedoes is what he’s saying.

That he learned from the Italians and equipped them with an escape system is, well, just barely a good thing.

But what the hell?

“It’s starting to look like there’s no job for us.”

“It will deliver concentrated fire in the form of mages. Surely this is one optimal way to solve your problems. No?”

Though exhausted by the whole thing, Tanya voices a small hope. “And what’s the guarantee that we won’t be blown away?”

“That part depends entirely on the Lord’s feelings on the matter. In other words, I’m sure you can rest easy.”

So I’m supposed to yield my fate to that incarnation of malice known as Being X? *That’s not funny!* thinks Tanya, and before she knows it, she’s spouting every curse she can think of. It’s not fair at all.

“Oh, Colonel Degurechaff, not to worry. I’m certain the Lord is protecting

you—believe in yourself! Not that it means much, but I, a fellow believer, have faith in you."

"What?"

"I developed this because I heard your suggestions. You could call it a joint project realized by the faith of fellow believers. I'm sure I couldn't have created something like this without the grace of God," he said with a charming smile. "Be proud, Colonel."

The doctor opens his arms wide as if blessing her. Is he overcome with emotion? Raising his hands to the heavens, he looks toward the ceiling with a radiant smile and begins mumbling his thanks to God.

Is this man satisfied yet? Nodding to himself as if he's come to some understanding, he returns his gaze to Tanya and speaks, looking delighted.

"This thing is practically our child! Ha-ha-ha! A splendid torpedo, isn't it? Just wonderful."

"Ch-child?"

"Don't you worry. She's a beautiful baby. I gave birth to her, but you sowed the seed. If it weren't for the insipid christening regulations, I would have asked General Zettour to be the godfather."

Are you saying I'm the dad and you're the mom?!

His eyes brim with pride as he pats the torpedo. Just go blind already, you *maniac!*

"This is nothing like those eels, the morons in the navy, have developed. I'm proud to say I used the utmost care with all the components, down to each and every fuse."

"What do you mean, Doctor?"

He had no idea how she felt—well, and he probably never intended to find out… I'd like him to reflect a bit on his "accomplishments."

"This is my torpedo. That is to say, it's a properly functioning torpedo."

"…Y-your torpedo, Doctor?"

My frank take on any torpedo the doctor's developing is sheer terror. It's literally a torpedo manufactured by a mad doctor. All that inspires is fear. But isn't that only natural?

Who wouldn't be scared out of their wits?

That means the doctor is the only one who misunderstands.

For a moment, he crosses his arms and falls silent; then his head pops up, his expression sincere. Agh, what now? I realize he's emotionally unstable,

but if he's going to explode in a moment, I'd like to gain some distance, so I hope he'll be considerate enough to hold on for a second.

Wondering what will happen next, Tanya's about to back away when suddenly the tall doctor is practically on top of her.

"…I thought I understood it logically, but…"

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, that's the question. I even said it was a joint project."

As I'm wondering what he's getting at, his hands suddenly clamp down on Tanya's shoulders again.

"I'm sorry. Allow me to apologize from the bottom of my heart."

The creepy scientist crouches to meet her gaze with his, and surprisingly there's genuine remorse in his eyes.

What is it, Doctor?

"It's *our* torpedo. I didn't mean to…"

With the pale face of a criminal, he kneels before her. Then he prostrates himself as if confessing some great sin.

"I'm so sorry."

Correction. I want to know *exactly* why you think that?!

"Please forgive me, Colonel. I nearly gave in to arrogance. It's our humble, intimate solidarity—our cooperation—that is able to produce miracles, but somehow I nearly forgot that. I became conceited."

Finally, his expression twists up and he ends up sobbing. If Tanya's honest sentiments at this moment were being recorded for posterity, they'd read: *I'd like to cry, too.*

What does he want me to do? Somebody, do something.

"Will you forgive my arrogance, Colonel Degurechaff?"

"…Doctor, what seems to be the matter?"

"A technician must remain humble. That is how we overcome challenges. I made the same mistake as the naval technicians. Without your comment, I would have been trapped in a never-ending cycle of darkness. My sister in faith, I thank you."

We're talking past each other.

I'm so lost I can hardly believe we're speaking the same language in the same country in the same era. Did the Tower of Babel fall or something?

Ahhh, these assholes who call themselves gods must love obstructing mutual understanding between humans. This is absolutely the sort of

uncivilized thing Being X and his ilk would do for fun.

Somebody, save me, please. It's urgent.

My entire view of this situation can be summed up by *It makes no sense*. I'm forced to ask myself, *What twist of fate led to the doctor and me having this incomprehensible exchange?*

"…Colonel?" Seeking salvation, Tanya abruptly turns to Lergen next to her, who has been maintaining a polite silence.

Can he get this guy to shut up? It's unclear how he interprets the concern in her face, but he gives her a small, quiet nod.

"Colonel Degurechaff."

"Yes, Colonel, what is it?"

"I understand your apprehension. It's a new weapon. And given all the defects that keep popping up with our torpedoes, it's only natural that you would have some reservations."

Ohhh! I'm nearly overjoyed but then the next setback comes along.

"But army specialists in the Technical Arsenal have conducted thorough operational tests. It should pass the bar for trustworthiness. As the doctor said, it can be called a product of solidarity."

The army must've really had some choice thoughts about the navy, huh? Not that I know for sure, but he sounded quite cheerful.

Actually, hold on. Scratch that initial hasty judgment.

From an organizational standpoint, Lergen is one of the most capable. If Tanya ends up competing for funding with him, it won't be easy to get along even if it's not army-navy relationship matters.

His comment also quietly overlooks the doctor's eccentric behavior.

"At any rate, we can probably make up for the inferiority of our main fleet with tactics and technology."

"I never imagined we'd be fighting an enemy fleet using torpedoes with the land army's stamp of approval. What can I say? I expect this will be so much fun."

Perhaps soon, the Reich's army will be building their own escort carriers and transport submarines, I'm sure. Of course, the only place that can actually happen is in a country where the army and navy have reached the extremes of mutual distrust.

# A CERTAIN DAY DURING THE GREAT WAR, IN THE VICINITY OF THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL

In order to discuss Dakar, we need to rewind a bit…

…to a story from before a series of truly strange events landed the unlucky soldier Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff in command of the Salamander Kampfgruppe.

Having just plunged into a war with the Commonwealth, the Empire was faced with the incredibly urgent need to acquire ship-striking capability.

Officially developed as the Undersea Acceleration Apparatus for General Purposes, its code name: V-2…

The weapon that plunged the Commonwealth Navy into the depths of terror. Its development began during Degurechaff's brief stint in the General Staff Office's Strategic Research Office.

But even though she was the one to submit the idea, she never stopped to consider that she might be the one to use it someday… Humans can be very irresponsible when things don't pertain directly to them.

Begun under such reckless circumstances, this weapon's development was actually overseen and managed quite sensibly. It all began when Tanya was asked for advice.

During a technical research project meeting she had been invited to one day as someone with a wealth of field experience, her mouth was hanging open in shock.

Under discussion was the topic of how to best deal with the superior Commonwealth Navy and the remnants of the Republic's fleet.

To this soldier, Tanya, who by some strange providence was familiar with the lessons of World War II, it was simply a matter of knocking out warships with aerial attacks or submarine operations.

Having been made to listen to endless debate about battleships and main cannons and big ships with big guns, her patience had reached its limit and she spoke up.

"Antiship combat? Couldn't we deploy antiship bombers or submarines with torpedoes?" she said. To Tanya, this was an eminently reasonable opinion.

How was she supposed to know that the Imperial Navy's *Aals* were practically real eels.

Not to mention that as someone with knowledge of Pearl Harbor and the sinking of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, she figured there couldn't possibly be a capital ship on the sea that could launch torpedoes and not sink the warship or whatever other target for that matter. It wouldn't function as a proper area denial strategy, but in general, maritime vessels will sink if hit with explosives.

Ultimately, she concluded that deploying a slew of strike teams would be plenty capable of accomplishing something similar. Deploying submarines in concert wouldn't be a bad idea, either.

In World War I, a lone submarine famously sunk three heavy cruisers in a single encounter.

To make things quicker, what she wanted to say was simple.

*Quit this ridiculous waste of time, and let's talk about torpedoes already!* Of course, she didn't neglect to make it more indirect and polite sounding using bureaucratic rhetoric.

"Considering our enemy's superior naval forces, the optimal measure for the imperial military to take is to obliterate those forces with a torpedo attack."

But the answer she received was one she had never imagined.

"…Colonel, we can't stop them with our submarines."

*Honestly, why only submarines?*

The response was so difficult to comprehend, she froze.

Tanya never had the slightest intention of suggesting that the Imperial Navy submarine units should fight a decisive battle against enemy capital ships alone. She just meant that the ships should be sunk using whatever was on hand and usable—a carrier wing, underwater explosives, a land-based strike unit, whatever, really.

She said a torpedo attack. No one ever said it had to be carried out by ships.

"Ah, I meant mainly using air forces, though I propose that full consideration be given to submarines operating in a support role."

"If only we had such things, Colonel."

"Huh? I, ummm…"

"Our military doesn't have a torpedo we can send after ships."

It was a careless misunderstanding due to being unfamiliar with the details of the air force as a mage.

Until being told at that very moment, Magic Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff hadn't realized that their air force had no torpedo bombers.

After all, the Pacific theater in her memory had been full of aerial torpedo attacks. And she knows that the devastating blow that felled the *Bismarck* was made by the old Fairey Swordfish.

To someone like that, it's a given that torpedo bombers exist.

Thus, Tanya was bewildered.

"…What?"

At that moment, every fiber of her being thought:

*What, they don't exist?*

*Why?*

*Why don't they exist?*

The question is so profound that it appeared openly on her face for a split second. And the expression that often garnered whispered comments crumbled away as well. Those present at the meeting were speechless to find that, with her soldierly manner gone, she actually looked her age.

"You didn't know?"

"No, I… Because we've achieved so much."

Breaking out in a cold sweat, she rifled through her memories. There had definitely been records of ships sunk in the newspaper coverage, internal rumors, and official bulletins.

"Haven't our air forces sunken any number of ships?"

Even if she didn't have time to look over the details of the air force's combat, she kept herself appraised of the overall military situation. Since there had been mention of sinking the warships that were the pride of the enemy fleet, she had been convinced their arsenal included torpedo bombers.

What's more, she had been on more than a few joint missions with the air force… Could've sworn that torpedo bombers were a normal thing to have.

Tanya had always thought of them as something that existed. Until she is told something doesn't exist, her knowledge imposes a sort of bias. After all, having been thrown into battle straight out of her accelerated education, her only joint combat with the navy had been as organic fire support.

All she could think was that there had to be attack planes *somewhere*.

"I misunderstood. I thought attack units did that."

“Those were all the work of dive bombers. And most of them were smaller boats like destroyers and troopships. We don’t deliberately pit our planes against capital ships yet.”

The reply was brusque. Tanya had just gotten a glimpse behind the curtain… What a sadly typical continental nation the Empire was, as represented by its Great Army.

As a result of a drastic expansion policy, the navy in recent years had grown stronger and stronger until it had acquired a formidable lineup.

But the air force was focused mainly on aerial supremacy and flying close air support missions, as might naturally be expected from a continental nation.

“Please excuse my ignorance, but are we developing attack aircraft and tactics for attacking ships at all?”

“We are, but they won’t be finished overnight. They’re probably a year or two away from producing real results. And you can expect their first time in actual combat to be even further out.”

Tanya’s question, more a supplication than anything else, ended with her fragile optimism being shattered.

Her only hope had been the Empire’s strength with technology.

That said, they were lacking the major intangible asset of know-how. Developing something practical would surely take a long time.

Even if there’s nothing that attracts an irrational outcome like acting emotionally…

…this human who values economic rationality sure has a hard time kicking her ironic hatred of irrationality.

“Then how about having subs or torpedo boats carry out close-range attacks?”

All she was doing, as a sensible adult and a soldier thoroughly trained by reality, was offering an alternative plan.

The air force being incapable of reliably attacking ships was a critical issue, so the plan clearly needed improvement.

The reason Tanya had hopes for submarines was because there’s nothing that says attacking ships is the exclusive purview of the air force. And the submarines were already deployed. Using what you have on hand…would be the most straightforward approach.

The imperial submarines were in very good positions threatening the

Commonwealth's sea-lanes. But the complexities involved in nailing a ship navigating on the surface with a torpedo was more difficult than Tanya had imagined. They should have had that capability, though, so Tanya raised her voice.

"A submarine offensive would have the greatest chance of success. We should consider a large-scale attack incorporating an underwater explosives unit and torpedo boats."

"That would be tough at present. Above all, we can't expect much given the major technical limitations we face."

*What!* Tanya frowned slightly. *That was a remarkably negative response—a bit overly negative, no?*

Of course, she understood that it would be difficult. It's easy enough to talk about approaching the enemy and firing torpedoes. But in reality, conducting a torpedo attack required an unbelievably complex procedure.

Calculating the ideal positions, securing the area in front of the bow, and even then whether or not you could attack at point-blank range basically came down to luck.

Even fundamental things such as working out the target's course or telling it apart from other ships were complicated enough to trip up proficient officers. In order to calculate a torpedo's path, the target speed, range to target, and angle on the bow all had to be known. Then a fuse and depth had to be chosen as well. So it was perfectly understandable why, from the navy's perspective, Tanya's request for a close-quarters attack was out of the question… It made sense.

And Tanya was, of course, aware that she was no naval expert. But rational thinkers have the adaptability to switch up their ideas and take the opposite approach.

Specifically, if they had trouble scoring hits, then that shortcoming simply had to be made up with numbers.

If one out of a hundred shots landed, then as long as there were a hundred shots, the target would definitely be hit.

"Let's flip this around. We have torpedoes, right? Couldn't we tackle the problem with quantity?"

"We do, but potential platforms for them are limited. We don't have enough that will allow us to reliably annihilate all the enemy ships."

But they had already considered everything she came up with.

Technicians tend to lean toward making innovations, but operations always did the best they could.

They'd adapted every measure possible to improve the low hit rate in both training and actual use.

Thus, to the participants who are trapped in a corner looking for a good idea and therefore asking for opinions from the field, it was the same old debate.

If it was just going to be a rehash of suggestions they had already heard, it didn't seem like they would get much out of the meeting.

Just as they began to think that, Tanya murmured something.

"Then let's put mages in torpedoes. We can launch manned torpedoes either from firing tubes or maybe make them detachable from the subs themselves. Then the mages can guide them to the enemy ships—how about that?"

The imagination of a person under pressure is truly nothing to sniff at.

Tanya had said it casually in the flow of the conversation. Things that got put to practical use usually had such surprising beginnings. No matter how crazy they sounded, they branch off from ideas that one can speak of in a normal state of mind.

A whole book could be written on the history of the world's crazy weapons.

The era with enough nukes to destroy mankind several times over. The era during which it was fun to make dark jokes about nukes, umbrellas, and mutually assured destruction.

As someone who technically lived during those times, Tanya found human torpedoes to be one viable conclusion.

Italy had used them, and there were Japan's *kaiten* as well.

"What?"

"Let's give torpedoes a pilot and a way to steer and smash them into the sides of ships, like the V-1s. As long as the personnel escapes before impact, there won't be any issues."

Either way, she was primed to accept the insane idea of human torpedoes.

Tanya cherished her own life above all others', so her motto, unlike that of those who died protecting their country before her, was "Handle life with care." Well…she's far from philanthropic about it, so it was more honest to phrase it as "Handle your life with care."

And she understood the value of human capital so well it made her sick. Which is why she felt that the Italian human torpedoes were a more clever weapon.

That's why she doesn't hesitate to pluck the best bits from each—the destructive power of *kaiten* and the life-preserving mindset of the Italian ones.

"…Are you seriously suggesting we redesign them to be manned?"

"The actual refitting will be relatively easy to implement. All you have to do is make the navy's torpedoes pilotable. Making them bigger would be another idea."

Italy's *maiali* were designed very practically.

Well, technically, they may have been mini-submersibles rather than torpedoes…

Upon approaching, it would set a mine.

In the attack on the harbor of Alexandria, a group of six people split into only three teams took out two battleships.

Surprisingly, there were times the torpedoes managed to take out oil tankers and destroyers, too.

From a cost-performance perspective, the *maiali* definitely outperformed the *kaiten*.

I mean, if I had to get on one, I'd definitely pick a *maiali* (because they're safe and feel safe).

Still, it's true that the destructive power of *kaiten* is attractive.

"How?"

"The simplest would be to add a seat straddling the torpedo. The ideal would be to fire from a torpedo tube, but if that were too difficult to figure out, a detachable type would be fine, too. If we go with the detachable type, we'd probably want to make them bigger to get the most power out of them, but…I'm just a layman."

"By which you mean?"

"I'm proposing this idea irresponsibly. I hope you'll refer to actual experts for their thoughts on the all-important elements of feasibility and cost."

In other words, it was just a flash in the pan. Tanya was basically just brainstorming.

What she brought up was the idea of attaching a limpet mine that would stick to the target amid the confusion of impact.

She was speaking as a field officer, thinking it would be handy if they had support for those sorts of unconventional tactics as an option.

"About your idea."

"Yes, sir."

"A broad outline is fine, but can you give us a little more detail? What do you mean by a human-guided torpedo?"

"Maybe the way I said it was too unconventional. It's not much different from the V-1. Once the torpedo is set on course, the crew would simply escape."

*Ohhh.* That was when she realized she hadn't said enough. It wouldn't do to mix up *maiali* and *kaiten*.

"We can consider using them for other things besides attacks on ships. For instance, I think using small torpedoes as boats could be promising."

"Small torpedoes as boats?"

The perplexed voice raised a natural question.

They could look at her with question mark faces as much as they wanted, but it wasn't as if—you know.

She didn't think she was saying anything that strange.

"I'm thinking about missions that involve infiltrating and destroying port facilities. We could use limpet mines to devastate enemy ships while they're anchored. We'd just have to decide if we'd let the crew be taken prisoner or have submarines pick them up."

"Right in front of the enemy? That'd be suicide. These self-destructing weapons would cause too many losses."

Of course, Tanya wasn't saying the whole army should be using them. She accepted that this was quite removed from orthodox methods of attack.

"I'm envisioning using them as underwater boats in purely special operations. I realize it would be an extraordinary method but think of the cost-effectiveness."

"Do you have a specific estimate?"

"…As they haven't been tested in live combat, I can't say. But compared to the mother ship submarine, the small torpedo crew would be operated by an extremely small unit."

The inferior Italian military took out two battleships with just six men.

It would be awfully hard to find a more cost-effective way to sink battleships—especially given the fact that although the six were taken

prisoner, none of them died.

"We should be able to expect great results attacking ships at anchor. The casualties would be minimal."

Yes, it would be possible to maximize effectiveness while reasonably expecting zero casualties. And if you used marine mages, you could probably even count on them hightailing it out of there on their own instead of becoming prisoners of war.

It wasn't out of the question.

"Are you being serious?"

That said, suicide weapons are the product of madness. They're invented in the wake of a nation's death throes, having been driven into a corner by the insanity of war.

Even in a certain country in the Far East, there were potent arguments against suicide attacks. In a nutshell, there's a huge difference between being resolved to die and knowing without a doubt that you will. In the Empire, especially, the generally permissible standard of military action was far removed from Tanya's understanding of what is and isn't necessary.

"If we can use them, of course. It's just one idea, but I think it's a good one."

But—

War is synonymous with being forced into extreme situations. It would never be described as total war otherwise.

Operating from that premise, Tanya can't understand the avoidance of reducing human lives to pure numbers. Like how, before World War I, a British general who saw glimpses of the future in the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, except everyone else decided he was off his rocker. War changes fixed notions through study with the teacher known as experience, who charges far too high a price.

Conversely, the more reasonable a person, the more they tended to think about the future from the perspective of fixed notions and common sense.

To put it another way, Tanya seemed like a monster who operated according to a logic and principles of action that were simply incomprehensible.

…Of course, Tanya merely possessed a half-decent amount of historical knowledge.

"No, I mean, are either of those plans to improve the torpedoes actually

possible to implement?"

The speaker was actually trying to block the crazy-sounding plans with the excuse that they seemed difficult to pull off, although Tanya had no idea that was the case.

"I don't know much about torpedo technology. But I can answer your question from the perspective of an aerial mage."

"Please explain."

"For an antiship torpedo attack with mages aboard…active hostile detection and oxygen supply formulas can be repurposed from high-altitude operations. By mixing pragmatism and cost-effectiveness with magic tech, I would imagine we'd be able to overcome most obstacles."

"What about for small torpedoes?"

"That's even simpler. By reducing the amount of munitions packed in, we can put a battery or something in the nose to take care of mobility. What more convenient U-boat could there be?" Can't forget to give myself some insurance. "Of course, I'm not certain they can be manufactured to specification using existing technology. There could be design challenges I haven't anticipated."

"You mean it'll be an innovation based mainly on combinations of existing technology?"

"Yes, I think low-risk development is best."

What crossed her mind was a bad example of a country in another world that put all their eggs in the technology basket and failed.

The Germans had a bad habit of being so obsessed with overturning the war situation with strange new weapons that it had serious knock-on effects for their existing production lines.

But due to her experience as an adult working in HR, Tanya is reasonable about the gap between expected value and reality.

After all, she wasn't speaking in theory but about events that actually happened and things that actually existed.

Regarding feasibility, she was always careful not to proceed imprudently.

"What is the Technical Arsenal's general opinion?"

And she doesn't forget to throw the question at the experts out of general diplomacy and a desire to evade responsibility.

To everyone else, it simply seemed like she wasn't going to let them get away with excuses—but she didn't know that.

To Tanya, she was merely following protocol.

To her, it was only natural to respect the views of experts in a supremely technical discussion.

Ignoring the engineers while creating an internal management tool was the same as asking for it to not go very well.

This was no different.

"The Technical Arsenal—well, if it's an order…we would probably be able to whip up a prototype fairly easily. It won't be too complicated to enlarge the torpedoes and create space inside for mages."

When asked, experts will mostly answer honestly. And these guys didn't want to be remembered as the team that didn't rise to a technical challenge.

*If we can do it, we can do it.*

That's the strength of a specialized occupation, as well as its weakness. Pros tend to do anything because they can.

"…Let's see how the research goes at the Technical Arsenal. I can't casually decide to send troops to their doom on a whim. A mission where they must be resolved to die is one thing, but missions where death is the only outcome…"

"Of course, human life is the highest priority. I'm firm on that point."

Those in attendance at the meeting were eager to find a way to achieve a breakthrough.

Everyone from the chairperson to all the way down reluctantly concluded that they didn't have a reason to refuse.

Which is why it got approved for development "just to try it out."

"Great. I'd like the navy to at least consider the idea."

*Arghhhh, when did that come from my own mouth…?* As that groaning thought comes unbidden, Tanya stares off into the distance with a far-off look in her eyes.

Five words come to mind: *You reap what you sow.*

This is a reality that's difficult to swallow. But grotesquely enough, the seeds I sowed really did lead directly to this situation.

Tanya started commenting on the navy's equipment without thinking, just idly wondering how handy it would be to have *maiali*…and now she's the one being made into a human torpedo.

It's hard to call any of this fun.

## JULY 12, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE INNER SEA FRONT

The Imperial Navy Inner Sea submarine units were originally outfitted to the same standard as the rest of the fleet.

In other words, the torpedoes they had been allotted weren't useful for anything at all. That they could speak of that in the past tense was good news both for them and the developer of the torpedoes.

A dramatic improvement in fuses meant a huge drop in absolute nonsense like landing direct hits with duds, explosions upon launch, and magnetic fuses that zip straight past the enemy fleet.

The eels have finally evolved into the torpedoes the submarine department has been waiting for. But even with such good news, it wasn't as if the standard-issue torpedoes became a silver bullet.

They're average weapons, nothing special.

Though not terribly fast, they prioritized mechanical reliability, and they were electric driven, which was an excellent design choice for manufacturing efficiency. They would be injected into the eager Inner Sea for use in commerce raiding.

Naturally, that meant the submarines deployed there would also be engaged in hunting merchant ships. But the situation was changing…just a bit. That's how it seemed to the veteran crews.

The first sign they noticed was strange orders from the higher-ups to make "repairs."

For some time now, they had been getting told to fit their subs with huge, mysterious attachments. Surprisingly, their protests that it would impact their speed underwater were ignored, and the dry-dock crews went ahead making the "special modifications" as strictly and decisively instructed.

When they saw the result, it was only natural that even more captains were firmly, dramatically against having them on their ships. Despite that, the submarine units, in a rare move, were forced to go along without any explanation besides the fact that it was "orders."

It was only a matter of time before *What the hell is this?* became a new shared greeting.

For better or worse, only the passengers and the crew of the mother ship submarine knew the truth. To come out and say it, they were for the new weapons. These modifications made it possible to carry the V-2. The consensus of all the crew members who were informed of the plan was invariably *These guys have lost their marbles*.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't only them. The aerial mages to be loaded into them agreed wholeheartedly. To be perfectly blunt, even the Technical Arsenal engineers were dubious.

The only one brimming with confidence was the inventor.

So while a great many people, including the submarine crews, questioned the sanity of the project with questions like, *You're really doing this?* Chief Engineer Schugel led the Technical Arsenal in equipping the submarines with the massive, unwieldy attachments. They were even kind enough to give the subs an elated send-off with three cheers, sure that they would work exactly as designed.

It was the kind of send-off that *really* made you feel like not doing your job.

If at that moment, the Commonwealth Jabos had sprayed the wharf with machine-gun fire and blown the engineers away, I would have given *them* three cheers.

The daydream was a bit too pro-enemy to be having on board a warship, but that just showed how much mental pressure Tanya was under at the time of their departure.

She had gotten distracted, staring gloomily at the wharf; even I was surprised how absentminded I was. Before there was any time to realize, they were at sea.

I mean, subs are slow.

They don't cruise much faster than ten knots. To an aerial mage who regularly travels at speeds with another digit added on, they're unbearably slow. It takes quite a while to get far enough out to sea that the scenery changes.

But that's not the only thing bothering her.

The most perplexing thing of all is that despite the operation having just begun, everything is going according to schedule. The troops mix in with the on-duty personnel, providing lookout support.

"…I don't think we've ever been this on schedule."

With a wry smile, I look out at the open water to see the beautiful blue. It's leisurely enough that I can find the time to appreciate how relaxing it is to watch the spray of the sub's wake.

How utterly puzzling it is to be on time. It's so strange and unnerving, as someone who until recently had irregular playdates with Commies in the vast open plains of the east.

"We're but a speck in the great big blue. Well, I guess we're a group of subs so more like a pack of specks. The sea is entirely too vast."

The eastern front was vast, too, but the Inner Sea feels even more so. Search and destroy submarine missions are a classic example of something easier said than done. Even Tanya, who has participated in a number of submarine operations and been on enough sub rides to not look forward to another, can't hide the fact that the idea of searching for enemies in a sub seems a bit comical.

Not that anyone's disparaging submarines. They're perfectly capable of locating and attacking enemies. I'm well aware of how effective they are as weapons. With the *Aals* improved to the point where they detonate properly, imperial submarines can be considered a legitimate threat to the Commonwealth fleet now.

If there's a problem, it's the orders expecting the submarines to do the lion's share of destroying enemy ships. Even the Imperial Japanese Navy, which was obsessed with fleet subs, didn't try to force those kinds of expectations on their submariners until they were under so much pressure it wouldn't have been strange if their heads exploded.

Submarines can't be used like aerial and armored divisions, but…the infantry-minded General Staff Office seems to have them confused with some kind of mobile strike force.

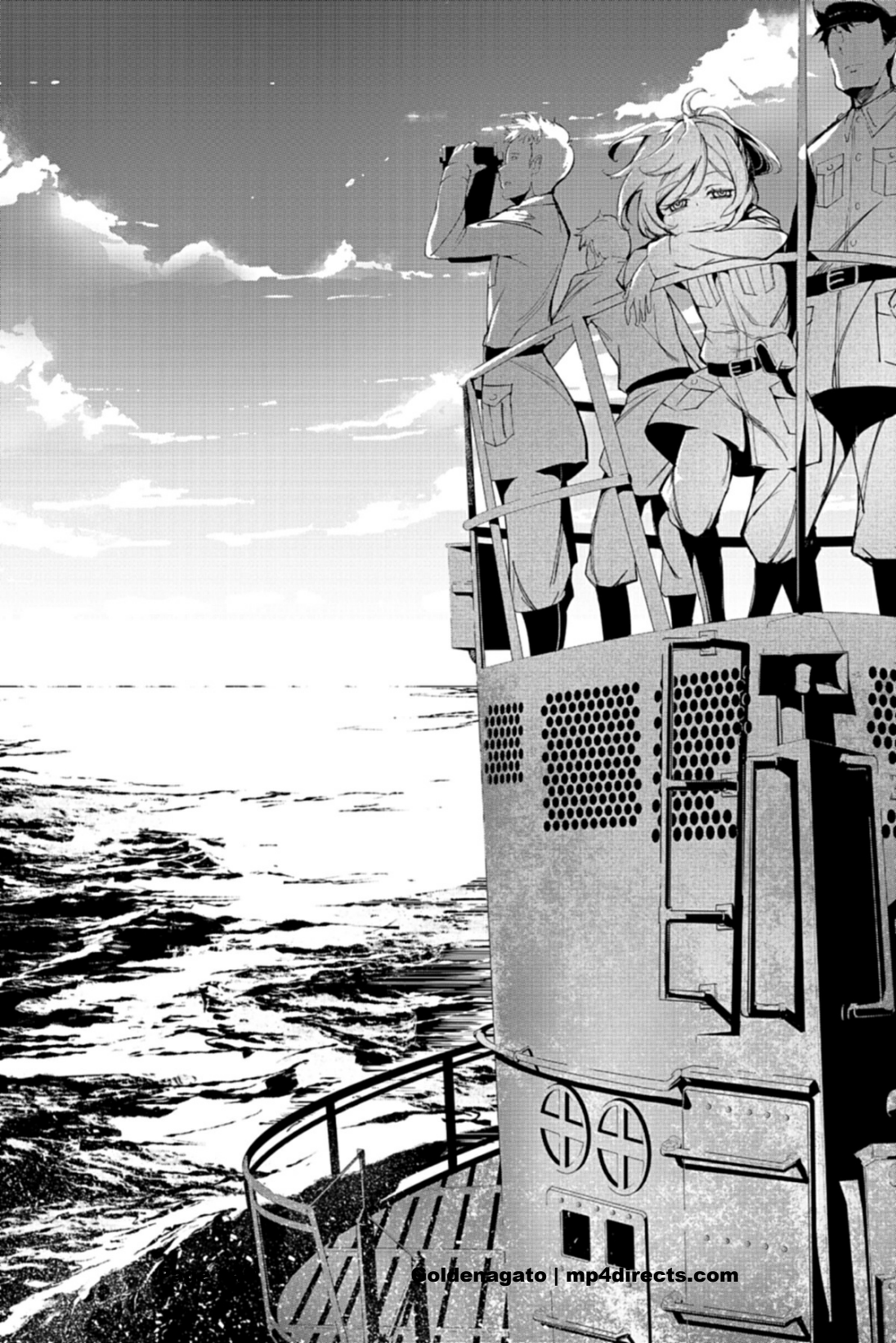
The Imperial Japanese Navy's interdiction strategy, often criticized as being dogmatic, was about weakening the enemy's naval forces, not completely destroying anything. They never claimed they were going to gain total control of the waves.

If the General Staff is calmly ordering us to search and destroy the enemy naval forces, then they've clearly lost it. Or maybe not.

Staff officers are overly specialized in land war. In other words, they're extra-smart army guys. If you think of sea power as land power, there are going to be some goofy orders flying around.

Although all Tanya can think is, *Are you stupid?* Though it's insolent to say so, she can't avoid feeling dissatisfied.

Land and sea are connected, but they're different worlds.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The only ones who can look out at the sea from land and give orders are admirals who intimately know what it's like out there.

Most of the geniuses at General Staff HQ don't know the first thing about the sea. It's terrifying to think about, but… I realize with a gasp that naval tactics weren't even taught at the war academy.

Tanya has built up a decent wealth of military knowledge after going through the academy and the war college. Even if it only holds for within the Empire, it's probably fair to say she has a better education than most.

That only emphasized the point that even if the curriculum was crammed into an accelerated time frame, it *should have* instilled in her everything the military thought a career soldier needed to know.

Yet, all I know about maritime battles comes from the remnants of my past self who lived in peaceful modern-day Japan, plus what little I've gleaned while on joint operations with the Imperial Navy.

I haven't received any systematic education on naval doctrine.

"…Even the staff trips were always to mountains, hills, or plains." As I grumble, I can only shake my head. In fact, it's entirely possible that I know more about naval battles than…any of the other staff or magic officers. "What in the…? This is a travesty. Also, that being my area of expertise brings me no joy."

Being good at one's job is a selling point. But there are also times that your specialty can be a curse. For example, like right now.

"I have to do this, but the reality that I have to do this sucks." Tanya lowers her voice so the sailors near her can't hear and moans, a dismal expression on her face. But though I'm gazing at the sea, my mind remains desperate.

Why did this happen?

How did it come to this?

"Haaah." It happens the moment her umpteenth sigh dissipates into the ultramarine sky.

"Telegram! It seems one of the Sixteenth Air Fleet's scout planes has located the enemy!"

The first report of a sighting. She can't decide if she had been waiting for the news or if she had been wishing it would never come.

Either way, it's intel on their prey. The submarine's crew perks up slightly.

“The enemy fleet’s been spotted! The enemy fleet’s been spotted!”

Of course, when it comes to work, I can switch gears easily enough.

“Colonel, Captain Barchet is calling you.”

“Tell him I’ll be right there!”

As soon as I receive the sailor’s message, I set off running. I suppose it’s lucky that the narrow submarine corridors that would slow an adult man down don’t get in my way at all.

I nimbly weave my way straight to the captain.

“Captain, I heard about the telegram.”

“Sorry to summon you like this, Colonel.”

Rank-wise he’s a major, but he’s in charge of the boat as its captain. Plus, he’s from the navy. It’s too complicated to get into the nitty-gritty of rank hierarchy.

“No worries, Captain Barchet. After all, I’m merely getting a lift; you’re the captain. It’s only natural to prioritize the host’s concerns. Don’t give it another thought.”

“Thank you. Well then, Colonel Degurechaff, here it is.”

As he speaks, he hands her the transcript of the message.

Upon skimming the document, Tanya nods with a small motion. A squadron of enemy ships. It’s almost certainly our target. That must be them —no mistake.

“…At the least, a group of warships that includes a few capital ships or cruisers. Two that are possibly heavy cruisers, four that are destroyers or light cruisers. No aircraft carriers.”

But that makes me feel like something is slightly off. If this is the enemy’s formation, it’s strange…

“No aircraft carriers? That’s odd. Given the way the Commonwealth usually operates, I would expect there to be an aircraft carrier in the vicinity. Could there be a mistake?”

“I’d maybe say they could have been mistaken if there were some oil tankers in the report, but I don’t think anyone would mix up a major warship and a carrier. If there isn’t one, that sounds like great news to me…”

Tanya nods in response to Barchet’s comments, but she isn’t satisfied and cocks her head. The importance of aircraft carriers can’t be taken lightly.

They rule the sea.

“Certainly. That said, at the moment, we can assume we just haven’t

found it yet."

"Yes, it's important to do a thorough search; however—and maybe I'm not saying this the right way, but…if our reconnaissance planes aren't being dogged by enemy direct support fighters, then isn't that circumstantial evidence that they aren't present?"

True, the canaries are singing safe and sound. If the reconnaissance crafts are able to carry out their mission without harassment, I can see how that would indicate there's no carrier nearby.

Carrier-based aircraft are tricky opponents. Generally speaking, carriers are also manned with a ton of marine mage units, so the absence of a carrier is something she can be truly happy about.

"…So we can really say there's no enemy aircraft carrier?"

"We shouldn't let our guard down, but I think it's safe to hope."

Tanya smiles as she agrees.

"I suppose we'll find out once we make contact."

After all, advance intel is all unconfirmed anyhow. If we had the ability to see across the entire battlefield, it would be the first innovation in military science since Clausewitz.

Alas, we're stuck in the company of the irritating fog.

"There's no sense stacking speculations atop more speculations. Let's just see what happens."

"Indeed, Colonel."

"All right, please take us to them."

"On it. We may just be deliverymen, but we'll do what we can. Shall we launch some of the old internal combustion models or the new electric ones as dummies after you all launch?"

Barchet's question makes me pause for a moment as I think on it.

He must be offering out of kindness, but I'm not sure what to make of it. Would the enemy really miss a pile of torpedoes streaming toward them, even if they're battery powered?

How does the navy conceptualize submarine stealth during an operation like this?

"The conditions at sea depend on the sky, I suppose. What's the weather forecast like?"

"Fair or slightly cloudy. I'm sure the sea won't get choppy."

"In that case…" Tanya shakes her head, refusing the captain's kindness.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, we can’t afford to risk the boat that’s supposed to be keeping a record of our achievements. It won’t look very good to go back with no idea of what we accomplished.”

Achievements are used to rationalize everything.

If it comes down to it, we have permission to enter Ildoa, but…whether or not we get results will change how our nation treats us after everything is said and done. If we stray into Ildoa having accomplished nothing, it’s easy to imagine that the Empire’s prestige will take a hit.

Though to avoid trouble, I’d prefer to avoid Ildoa entirely after the strike. This is for a different reason than the domestic one.

That is to say, Ildoa, our ally, is awfully neutral for an ally.

If someone from a belligerent state came fluttering in, they might be taken prisoner without any questions asked. Personally, I feel it’s worth considering being detained by this “strictly neutral power” if it meant I could secure my safety for the remainder of the war.

But given the strange relationship between Ildoa and the Empire at the moment, I’m not sure it would work out. It’s possible we would merely end up being traded as a bargaining chip.

There’s nothing safe about that.

It’s difficult to see the long-term implications, but short and medium term, it’s highly likely that it would negatively affect my status in the Empire.

Considering the current situation…Tanya should only run to Ildoa once every other option is exhausted.

Oh, right. We were ordered to show Ildoa we mean business.

Violence is usually said to cause trouble, but the truth is, that depends on the time and place. It’s better for a belligerent power to be feared than taken lightly. Surely that’s the essence of Machiavellianism.

“…A chain is quite something.”

[ chapter ]

# IV

## Love from Underwater

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# [chapter] IV Love from Underwater

**JULY 15, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE INNER SEA FRONT**

Currently, imperial submarines typically operate in packs.

Two subs are better than one. Three are better than two. It's all about the strength of numbers. These pack tactics were originally developed to interdict merchant shipping, but they work just fine against battleships.

When a sighting is reported, the hunt begins.

The squadron succeeds in making contact.

"Message from a squadron mate. Enemy ship sighted!"

"Got it on sonar!"

"What's the source of the sound?"

"Definitely an enemy propeller."

"…It's so loud. This is… Wait. There's more than one… What class is this? It's hard to make out. But that's definitely a convoy."

"Prepare to launch torpedoes! Don't fall behind the others!"

Everyone in the control room is focused and alert.

From Captain Barchet on down, the whole crew is doing impressive work.

Even Tanya, who is sitting in as a mere formality, can tell that these submariners are sharp.

A short while later, they must have reached a stopping point. Barchet approaches and provides a concise explanation. Then he hesitantly adds another comment.

"Colonel Degurechaff, er…the sun is about to go down."

"Just before sunset—the perfect time to attack, I'd say."

"Normally, that would be the case. But"—he seems to be thinking and voices his doubt—"due to the nature of the V-2, the reduced visibility of

twilight is far from ideal. Should we avoid combat?"

He has a point.

On the other hand, it's only one point.

"You raise a valid issue, but the sea is vast. If we withdraw now, there's no guarantee we'll make contact again. On the contrary, I imagine it would be quite difficult."

"That's our job."

No offense to the captain who says we can rely on him, but I'm not one of those landlubbers who has no idea how submarines operate.

"I'm speaking from experience."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Tanya nods. "Just a little bit. Most recently off the coast of Norden." After a polite disclaimer that the captain's consideration is highly appreciated, they get right to the point. "Submarines can only go so fast underwater. I know it's a lot to ask, but I'd like you to press on with the attack."

"Please don't make it sound as if we're tortoises."

"I don't mean to criticize you or your crew. I'm merely stating the facts. The problem of mobility isn't…one that can be solved through trying your best."

When she asks if she's mistaken, the captain winces. He probably wasn't expecting to get a lecture on submarine tactics from someone he'd pegged as a simple magic officer.

It's also true that they're pros.

I understand that talking like a know-it-all is bad form. But necessity is the mother of invention, the patron of mandatory innovation, and ultimately, the extremely hairy thing that is an order from a ranking officer.

"Either way, we have to do it. And right now, the chance is in front of us." Tanya wears a smirk. "There's no guarantee Lady Luck will let us grab her by the hair from behind. So we should just nail her in the face and snatch whatever we can by the fistful while we have the chance. Don't you agree, Captain?"

"It's as you say. No matter what it takes…we have to get the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps home safely."

Parting with Barchet and his renewed determination, Tanya heaves an exasperated sigh as she rejoins First Lieutenant Serebryakov, who has come

along for the ride.

"Any updates, Colonel?"

"Prepare to sortie, Lieutenant. Time for the main event of any submarine operation."

The troops in the other submarines are probably feeling nervous, too. *And that's why…* She chuckles softly. "Don't worry. This won't be as rough as the V-1s. We'll be able to steer a bit."

Amid the noisy laughter, Tanya turns toward an approaching runner.

"Colonel, we received a follow-up report."

The tense look on the face of the signaler who has brought the latest intel on the enemy's position sets off alarm bells.

What could it be about?

"Another sub reported in. They found a carrier."

"A carrier? So there *was* one."

Suppressing a sigh, Tanya shakes her head. The submarine crew is probably happy to have such a fine quarry. Sadly, I would have preferred it if the aircraft carrier was absent.

"…If our aerial recon isn't accurate, that's a problem."

I get that fog of war is a very real issue. But for the air force to miss something that enormous is a pretty big fuckup.

Unfortunately, if it's there, we have to get rid of it. If we don't, things will get dangerous later on. We can't have an aircraft carrier preying on transport ships steaming back home.

"In a V-2, we should be able to handle it. In any case, we have no choice but to trust in the machines."

Anything made with tender love and care by that scientist must pack an absurd punch. As for safety, even bothering to think about it is pointless.

"We'll nail them with a coordinated strike. We're no longer in a situation where just hitting the battleships is enough. We need to nail them and the carrier at the same time."

Noting the need for flawless communication, Barchet approaches Tanya to plan, receiver in hand, and pounds his chest as if to say she can count on him.

"Between this and the other two subs we have twelve V-2s. What will you aim for?"

"Capital ships are the main targets. We'll send six at the battleships and

four at the carrier. For the cruisers, two is good enough. In the worst case, we'll mop up the destroyers with torpedoes or mines."

The captain nods his understanding, and Tanya asks him to relay a message.

"After the crews eject, we'll hide in the water until the munitions detonate and then ascend to strike. We won't need you to pick us up. Please make sure everyone knows."

"Are you sure?"

He sounds worried, but Tanya waves a hand. "It'd be nice if you could be ready just in case, but…I don't want to make things difficult for you in these waters."

"Colonel, it's their job."

My adjutant cuts in with a cold comment. She's probably less annoyed and more simply speaking out of a sense of duty, but…Tanya nods.

"You're right, Lieutenant Serebryakov. But don't you think that to work together, both parties must be professional?"

Of course, this whole arrangement is predicated on the premise that we'll be carrying out the strike.

My adjutant backs down with a grimace; how bold she's gotten lately.

It's hard to find officers who will do whatever needs to be done, even if it's just because they feel compelled to show everyone else how it's *really* done.

I'm more than happy to watch over her continued growth and development.

Seemingly impressed by this exchange, Barchet salutes her. "I pray for your success."

"Don't pray for us, Captain Barchet. We're just off to do what must be done. Believe in us. If we fail, then you can pray to God, Buddha, the devil, or whoever else you prefer."

"…Apologies, Colonel."

"Hmm?" Tanya smiles faintly. "We're grateful for your kind words, nonetheless. Now then, this a good opportunity. Enjoy your front row seats and watch how the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion operates."

## OFF THE COAST OF DAKAR, COMMONWEALTH HOME FLEET, SECOND SQUADRON (OPERATION AGREEMENT'S VANGUARD), T-13:25 TO OPERATION AGREEMENT (APPROXIMATELY 1900 HOURS LOCAL TIME)

This was an operation to chase down the enemy.

Imperial forces were trying to flee by night, but the task force would annihilate them in one blow and put an end to their operations on the southern continent. Unlike most of the deadlocked fronts, this battle seemed winnable.

In other words, they didn't expect much resistance.

How would the imperial poor excuse for a navy contend with the Commonwealth's fleet? Any child could tell how it would end. The Empire held an insurmountable number advantage in terms of both capital ships and lighter vessels.

How could a continental nation hope to compete with the world's greatest maritime power?

No one in the Commonwealth's fleet doubted for a moment that this battle was as good as won.

But once it began, everyone was screaming in shock.

"What's going on?!"

*It's like we cracked open the gates of hell!* But the time for regrets had passed. The price for their negligence would be paid for with lives.

"The *Hood*! *Mighty Hood* is—!"

The shrieks of the sailors rang out. One look was all it took to realize what was going on. The roar reverberating across the battle zone, the rising smoke.

The horrifying sight was hard to look at.

They were watching the death throes of a once magnificent iron ship. The smoke pouring from its listing hull and the terrible noise indicated that it was too late to save the *Hood*.

The *Hood*. *Mighty Hood*…

Before the war, it was the largest ship fielded by any of the major powers and arguably the Commonwealth's best warship. The *Mighty Hood* was the pride of the navy.

And it only took a single hit to sink her.

*One hit and it's flotsam?* Even after witnessing it with their own eyes, all the sailors wanted to scream that it couldn't be true.

*It wasn't supposed to be like this!* they cried, the captain proudly vowing to share his ship's fate while the crew didn't even have time to writhe in agony.

But at the same time, these elites, though grieving, persevered and set themselves to work. As soon as they realized the *Hood* had been torpedoed, the rest of the fleet broke formation and began performing evasive maneuvers.

These course changes were carried out with as much speed and discipline as anyone could hope for.

Exceedingly prompt decision-making, the quickest reaction imaginable, and motions so orderly that the entire squadron even broke formation in perfect sync.

But the sailors' determined steering proved futile.

"Th-the *Ark Royale*!"

A quivering shriek announced the cruel fate that had befallen the ship.

"What is it? Report in!"

"Th-the *Ark Royale*'s been hit!"

A thunderous roar accompanied the plume of water that shot up next to the aircraft carrier. Even from the deck of the destroyer farthest away from the center of the fleet, there was no way to mistake what was happening.

As the sailors looked on, dumbfounded, the carrier rapidly began to list. Was it due to the impact? Planes that had been trying to take off from the *Ark Royale*'s deck collided and burst into flames. Not enough time passed for anyone to even feel shock.

"Shit!"

The marine mages and crew who succeeded in making a swift escape tried to put out the fires breaking out, but the conflagration only grew.

"Watch the water's surface! Look for the torpedo wakes!"

Over the cacophony of other orders, the captain of the destroyer bellowed with grim resolve.

"If you have to, get in the line of fire to stop them! Don't let them get any more hits in!"

The escort ships couldn't allow any more torpedoes to get through.

To save the crew of the *Hood*.

To save the *Ark Royale*.

With enemy subs lurking nearby, they couldn't even halt to render aid. With rage and impatience blazing in their breast, all the sailors were unconsciously gritting their teeth.

But a moment later, the crew of Commonwealth destroyer *Bermuda* found themselves cursing God with every ounce of their being.

Right in front of them, the cruiser *Yliastral* was running at full speed.

But then there was an awful sound. The dreaded plume of water rose up.

"*Yliastral*! The *Yliastral*!"

The already disappearing hull had been split in two. There was no chance of saving the ship. To avoid being pulled under by the sinking ship, the *Bermuda* was forced to change course.

At the same time, the captain assumed command and did everything in his power to shield the foundering ship. At last, the tenacious efforts of the sonar operators bore fruit.

"I'm getting something! It's…propulsion?! I hear one enemy sub—No, two?! Wait, there's more! It's a hunting pack!"

"Change course! Hurry! It's time to put a stop to all this!"

"Aye-aye, sir!"

"We won't let them leave here in one piece! Prepare for anti-sub combat! Make those bastards pay!"

The Commonwealth light cruisers and destroyers responded without delay. They collectively decided that even if it impaired their sonars, the priority was preventing more torpedo attacks.

In order to swiftly silence the submarines, they brought out the hedgehog, which would scatter multiple submunitions. It was a new weapon that had just been issued to the fleet.

These had been developed specifically to send those cheeky imperial subs to the bottom of the ocean.

The weapon made area denial operations with depth charges possible and gave the destroyers confidence that they had the tactical advantage.

"Don't lose track of them! Have *Lewis* and *Victor* nail them, too!"

The thirst for revenge and the duty to protect their fellow sailors. Those feelings drove the crews to the limit. Sailors raced across gangways and through tight corridors, desperate to make every second count as the noncommissioned officers shouted themselves hoarse urging them on.

They had been trained well, and it showed. These soldiers were as devoted to their fatherland as any human could possibly be.

Sadly…

Because their efforts were the best anti-submarine maneuver, they backfired.

The dedicated submarine hunters, a mix of destroyers and light cruisers, had spread their munitions on their decks. The instant they began to fire into the water…

This was the moment the devils in the water had been waiting for.

Disaster clinging to the backs of the torpedoes.

The Commonwealth's most dreaded enemy rose out of the sea.

"E-enemy mages, port side! They're coming in quick!"

The lookout's quaking shout was too late. What would happen if the hedgehogs and other explosives out in the open were hit with an explosion formula?

"Shit! All hands, brace for—!"

The warning wasn't fast enough. Having made their abrupt appearance, the mages calmly deployed their formulas. As they cast their spells, the captain in command lost consciousness right as his flesh failed him.

"The *Bermuda*'s been blown up?!"

Her keel was visible in the flash of the roaring explosion. That brief glimpse was more than enough for her consort ships to understand what had happened. The rapid sinking of the *Bermuda* had been caused by the detonation of the depth charges and torpedoes that filled the decks and hulls of destroyers.

But how?

The cause was plain to see—secondary explosions. The weapons that should have given them the edge were working against them instead.

But how?

For a moment, it was utterly incomprehensible to the crew of the remaining ships. What brought them back to their senses was the screams of a lookout.

"Mages?! Imperial mages!"

*Ahhh, those sons of bitches.*

By this point, everyone knew exactly what had happened.

The commanders of the fleet's remnants understood perfectly—and

cursed the heavens. They had been distracted by the torpedo attack, and now a marine mage unit was wreaking havoc.

That had to be it.

They were painfully aware of how powerful this tactic was. After all, imperials had done it over and over up north.

It had become so familiar that it made them sick. The Commonwealth forces had even tried to beat the imperials at their own game by deploying marine mages from their own submarines during the invasion of the former Entente Alliance.

But they had unconsciously let their guard down, convinced that no surface fleet could possibly best them. And that was what led to this disaster.

The fleet's officers were far from inept; they had a firm grasp of the situation—it was a real goddamn mess. Normally, fighter planes and marine mages would prevent the enemy from even getting close.

"All hands, battle stations! Fire at will!"

The destroyer *Lewis* instantly opened up with everything it had at the ready.

"Dump everything flammable! Launch all the hedgehogs!"

Destroyer *Victor* had finished loading its hedgehogs and launched all the charges at the approximate position of the enemy subs. They were dumping their munitions as quickly as they could, but a moment later, both of them were instantaneously incapacitated by secondary explosions.

"*Lewis* and *Victor* are done for!"

They had carried out their duty to the bitter end.

Even if it was only a short time, by getting the majority of the imperial forces to concentrate on the pair of destroyers, the other ships in their formation were granted a brief respite that felt disturbingly like a suspended sentence.

"Change course! Full speed ahead!"

Still dumping anything even remotely explosive, the ships that managed to adopt an evasive posture were lucky to still be afloat. Unfortunately, a disastrous storm was closing them.

Unfair? Yes, it was.

The vanguard including the warships and aircraft carrier that had been almost completely wiped out at the start of the engagement. It would have been one thing if they had been attacked by a powerful enemy fleet and given

the enemy as good as they got. But losing to a few torpedoes and a couple lousy mages?

"…How is this happening?!"

No one would've blamed the officers for staring at the heavens and offering up every bad word in the book. To all those from the Commonwealth, this seemed like a bad dream.

*If this is a dream, I want to wake up right now.*

But these were navy officers who embodied the John Bull spirit. In their hearts, they lamented their terrible fate. But the only thing that came out of their mouths was a steady stream of orders to keep their sailors alert and moving.

"Dump the spare torpedoes and depth charges before we get blown up, too! Hurry!"

They had to do everything they could to survive. The remains of the fleet didn't rest, either. For the destroyers, it was terribly shameful, but they threw all flammables, including their depth charges, overboard.

"Keep firing! There are only a few enemies!"

"Call up the marine mages! The carrier needs help! Assist with damage control!"

They somehow managed to continue struggling.

From the looks of it, there was less than a company of mages attacking. Logically, they should have been able to handle them.

Maybe a dozen enemies. That was all.

A handful of imperials taking on a full squadron of the Royal Navy? This was a terrible joke.

If only they hadn't gotten so close, the fleet's defense net could have repelled them or at least kept them at bay to some extent… Of course, that came with the assumption that their own marine mage unit was not being swallowed up in the massive fire that broke out on the aircraft carrier.

Though they had been steadily increasing the volume of fire, the density of any individual ship's fusillade was lacking.

All the sailors knew it. *Something is better than nothing.* Clinging to that thought like a prayer, after firing a hail of bullets, they even got creative and put up a smoke screen to hide themselves.

But the scales of battle were merciless.

Once tipped, they wouldn't go back; they seemed to sneer at the people's

efforts.

"*Vi-Vincent* is—!"

Though there may not have been even a company's worth of mages, *Vincent* was not spared under their concentrated fire. She was just barely staying afloat, but after being engulfed in a ball of flames, she was permanently out of the fight.

That it hadn't been knocked out by a secondary explosion was evidence that their decision to jettison as many explosives as possible was the correct one. Surely the imperial mages had intended to detonate any torpedoes or depth charges on board. The moment *Vincent* burst into flames, the shooting stopped…but realizing that she wasn't going to blow on her own, they resumed the attack.

Sadly, that was all their efforts achieved.

Perhaps it was simply the powerlessness of a ship that couldn't counterattack? *Vincent*'s future was not very bright.

Seeming to have understood the boat's condition, the enemy mages shifted the focus of their fire to the waterline. Once a hole was opened in her hull, the situation dramatically worsened due to unchecked flooding.

The villains finished their wicked deed in an instant.

Then they mercilessly went after the rest of the Commonwealth vessels.

"…Enemy mages rapidly approaching!"

*Yes, I bet they are.* The captain ground his teeth slightly. Having judged that *Vincent* was no longer a threat and abandoning their attempts to set off secondary explosions, it was obvious what the imperial mages would do next.

Even when some marine mages belatedly emerged from the listing *Ark Royale*, their attempts to fend off the enemy were futile. No, it was worse than that!

The formulas they deployed only brought withering fire on their positions.

Even for the elite marine mages, fighting back while surrounded by incoming fire and explosions was beyond them.

To their enemy, it was divine assistance. In exchange for providing the slightest support, they were forced down ever so easily.

And the fate of the final destroyer, firing all its anti–air cannons, was about to be decided.

"Here they come!"

"Shit, shit! They're so fucking quick!"

If sophistication has an aesthetic, it is surely cruel beauty. The sharp curve traced by the enemy mages was supremely polished. Before the gasping audience below, they took a pristine strike formation that would have been fascinating to observe if the circumstances had been different.

And they did it so naturally; anyone watching knew the grim reaper was about to swing his scythe.

*Yes, this is it.*

*This is where we die.*

They had no choice but to face reality.

The end was bearing down on them.

"You devils…!"

It was just as someone let that slip as if to curse the heavens.

There they were, the final attack about to begin at any moment. But then suddenly, the imperial brutes scattered, their formation thrown into disarray.

An instant later, the world was bathed in blinding light.

The vision of the grim reaper that emerged from the careful choreography was dashed, and the death that seemed unavoidable was suddenly blown away.

A work of God? Was it a miracle?

No, no, no.

"Reinforcements! It's reinforcements from the main fleet!"

As the communications officer did his happy job of delivering the good news, the world filled with light. It was a hail of optical sniping formulas raining down on the imperial aerial mage unit.

"They came!"

"We're saved!"

"Oh my God!"

May good news always be so.

It was less a welling up of joy and more an explosion of emotion. Everyone still alive went wild at the sight of reinforcements.

Not enemies but allies! Allied aerial mages had come to support them!

They had changed in an instant. Just a moment ago, these sailors had been hurling every curse word known to man at God in heaven, but now they praised his glory as if born again.

And what's wrong with that? Those are perfectly good Commonwealth values.

As for the imperial mages…they were quickly turning around, scurrying away with their tails between their legs. Imagining their indignation at having their fun interrupted made the Commonwealth sailors feel a little better despite their bitter defeat.

The losses were huge.

Too painful to think about.

But that was precisely why someone from the Commonwealth would sneer at their enemy in this situation. *Too bad for you!*

## THE SAME DAY, THE 203RD AERIAL MAGE BATTALION

Talk about missing the finishing touches.

We were so close to literally annihilating them! Instead, we made a glaring error.

We pulled off a high-risk attack against the enemy fleet in the V-2s! What's wrong with wanting to collect dividends?!

Our chances were so slim, yet we made it happen—our strike force bloodied their battleship, their carrier, and even the cruiser and destroyer escorts! We were so close to a perfect shutout!

We absolutely deserved to go home with a trophy in our hands!

Yet, at the very last moment, we took a horrible hit out of nowhere. The shock was like finding out the boy who was supposed to bring around dessert had disappeared partway through the meal.

Well, hold on. Let's reframe this in a more positive light.

We did get to eat the main dish.

We devoured the fleet served up by the General Staff that appeared along the escape route. We did our job perfectly. As long as General von Romel isn't running late…the withdrawal shouldn't run into any problems.

And he wouldn't mess up a tactical move. Surely, they'll manage to withdraw safely. And even if something did happen, so what?

If someone is late, that's their own fault.

The basics of being an adult in society are absolutes in the military. If you're late, you get left behind. That's a fundamental principle of acting in a group with no room for doubt.

Which is why to Tanya, the appearance of the tardy Commonwealth mages who still manage to barge their way in is utterly absurd.

Since the unit scattered the moment we came under attack, we didn't suffer any real damage. But I'd like to demand compensation for the severe impact on my mental state!

They always get in our way at the very last second! If you're going to be late, just don't show up at all!

"It's a brigade-sized group of mages! They're coming at us fast!"

"Tsk! Time's up!"

The high-level coordination necessary to be able to break formation at the drop of a hat. The organizational power it takes to maintain unit cohesion even under what is essentially a surprise attack. These two things speak to the outstanding quality of my unit. And that unit, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, would very much like to avoid being outnumbered.

Especially in a battle over water. If it's possible to avoid, then I want to avoid it.

"Colonel! How about just two more ships!"

"Time is more valuable! Don't be greedy! We're pulling out!"

Tanya calls for them to pack it up, but Major Weiss's battle lust is so great that he can't seem to suppress his desire to go after the prey right before their eyes.

"It won't take much at all if we do it right now! Please let us go!"

He wails that he can take them out with just a few formulas.

How serious is he? Well, he could probably pull it off. The only issue is that I don't care about that at this point.

With enemy reinforcements closing in, the rules of the game have changed. Before their arrival, wiping the ships out would have been optimal but…these assholes.

Tanya clicks her tongue and shakes her head. As a pro, I can separate emotions from needs…because I understand what times like these call for.

"Give it up, Major. We're pulling out!"

"…Understood!"

Weiss is a veteran, so he doesn't protest more than once. It's important to know the time and place.

"All units, retreat! I'll allow you to fire some parting shots at the enemy mages, but that's all!"

Tanya formally calls for a retreat and simultaneously green-lights a snap harassment attack to bloody the pursuing enemies.

At the point she decides to bully their chasers, the objective becomes to slow them down as much as possible.

"Hold on! Before you start firing—I prohibit shooting at any ships as of

this moment!"

"What?!"

"Major, if we sink all the ships, those enraged idiots will ram us in the ass!"

Am I the only one who thinks around here? I heave a sigh. Damn it, Weiss. Even after all I said, you were going to attack them the moment you got the chance, weren't you?

Right as Tanya opens her mouth to chew him out, a different voice comes over the radio.

"Major, if there are ships left, the Commonwealth forces will pick up any drifters. If the mages are too busy with rescue duty, they won't be able to follow us!"

Nice, Visha! Tanya's face relaxes in happiness.

My advisor always knows what I'm thinking. She really is still a top-notch assistant.

"What she said, Weiss! Make good use of the injured troops! They'll need someone to take care of them and somewhere to take refuge!"

With the combined power of Tanya and her adjutant's comments, Weiss immediately catches on. He points at an enemy destroyer and then gazes at some soldiers in the water and brandishes an evil sneer.

"…You're more of a humanitarian than I would have thought, Colonel."

"I'm a humanitarian through and through."

The blank looks from my vice commander and adjutant must be symptoms of the poison of war. After all, who can deny that Tanya is a firm believer in humanitarianism?

As long as it doesn't impinge on my own safety, I'm all for being humane.

"Isn't it wonderful to love your fellow man? Enemies and allies alike should value life more highly."

There is at least a brigade's worth of rapidly approaching Commonwealth marine mages. It'll be impossible to link up with the submarine with them on our tails. Actually, it'll be hard enough to just shake them off and get away cleanly.

Normally, that's how it would play out. But it seems like we're in luck.

That's because the enemy mages have a whole pile of people who need their help right away. As of this moment, the limping destroyer is significant.

It can rescue the crew flailing in the water.

And the Commonwealth mages won't forsake the people who need their help.

"The sun's going down! Clear out! Well done, troops!"

"""""Understood!"""""

The way that ship's listing, I doubt it'll last much longer, but the carrier is still nominally afloat, so that should be enough to keep them from pursuing us too closely. In order to save the crew, the mages will have no choice but to focus on the rescue over giving chase.

"Check your navigation! I don't want anyone getting lost!"

The sun is about to go down, so the timing is perfect. Once the sun sets, searching and retrieving the people who've gone overboard will be much more difficult. But…if the marine mages quit chasing us now, they'll still have enough time. This is the crux of my plan.

Night isn't a great time for chasing down your enemy, and they're quickly running out of time to save their fellow troops. It's one or the other. The Commonwealth isn't the Federation—can they really ignore humanity in a case like this?

Tanya knows the answer to that. Respect for human life! So wonderful and humane!

From the perspective of logically avoiding combat, surely anyone would do the same. Even Tanya would use rescuing allies as an excuse to avoid combat.

No one loses; it's a win-win.

In other words, the delightful equilibrium Mr. Nash so enjoyed is responsible for bringing about a modest peace in a wartime setting.

Tanya heaves a mental sigh.

I've been missing peace for too long. If I don't survive this war, I'll miss the chance to collect unearned income and live off royalties. This is the time to work hard for the sake of my future.

Apparently, once you manage a decent withdrawal, the luxury of idly complaining becomes available again. This must be a symptom of feeling more at ease.

Charging in on the V-2, breaking away from a brigade of enemy marine mages… Having done all that and put it behind me, it's no wonder I'm feeling relaxed. That being said, negligence is the greatest enemy, so I

suppose that means right now is the most dangerous moment of all.

Realizing the need to keep my troops on guard, I casually call out to everyone in the unit.

"Good work, everybody! But don't forget to keep an eye on our rear! The mission's not over till we return to base safely. Don't let your guard down on our way home!"

"""""Yes, ma'am!"""""

Everyone responds in the affirmative.

If there's anything to complain about, it's that they all sound a bit fatigued.

…There's not much to be done about that. Though they're flying in formation at cruising speed, this is post-combat, and it takes extra attention to fly over water. If we miss the rendezvous with the submarines, we could end up stranded over the vast sea. There's necessarily an added layer of tension compared to the eastern front, where anyone could land at their own discretion.

Including the fact that this is post-combat, I'm impressed they're doing so well. I guess it really was worth investing in human capital all this time. Wise investments bring about unbelievably huge returns.

At first, I thought they would merely serve as a decent meat wall, but…I think I can feel tears in my eyes. My battalion has become an indispensable part of my toolset. They're like a well-tuned piano. An instrument familiar to your hands is an optimal weapon for creating new possibilities.

Only a fool among fools would squander such a precious resource. And I have absolutely no intention of being a fool. I decide to count my investment as money spent on insurance that isn't coming back while carefully maintaining formation.

As a result, it's a brilliant whiff.

The question is whether to view it as a waste or as a necessary expense. Surely, it's an expense. Having a margin of safety doesn't mean cutting costs unconditionally. Rather, expenditure on personnel merely warming their seats should be decreased. Well, in this case, even the seat warmers have been thrown into the meat grinder, since the Empire is in a state of total war…

*Hmph.* Tanya sniffs and shifts her train of thought.

No sign of anyone following us this far. We arrive at the meeting point without any hitches.

To Tanya, that is rightly a great achievement.

The simple fool who thought solving problems makes him capable frequently scoffs at the wise man who prevents the problems from happening.

But it's obvious who the truly clever one is. There is no better victory than no battle at all.

Soon enough, the battalion arrives at the designated meeting spot at the appointed time and sends up three flares. It's a moment that makes your heart freeze. *It's fine if your allies are nearby, but if there are enemies…*is what's on everyone's minds as they keep watch in all directions with bated breath.

Luckily, a single boat peeks out of the water.

The lookout who jumps onto the deck sends up the agreed-upon signal flare. There's no mistake. I order my troops to respond and exhale lightly. It's hard to make out the silhouette, but it's a friendly submarine.

We can assume the danger of becoming lost at sea has passed.

"…Huh? Is that…?"

"What is it, Major?"

"It looks like a different boat from the one we came in on."

For a moment, Tanya isn't sure whether to be impressed or dismayed.

Honestly, she's surprised Weiss can tell what type it is in this evening light. He must have seriously sharp eyes. His ability as a lookout is praiseworthy. But he loses major points for lacking a sense of how fast a submarine can go.

"…You think a sub could meet back up with us at their speed? C'mon, Major."

Under Tanya's disappointed gaze, Weiss blushes for a moment so clearly that it's visible even in the darkening twilight. Well, that just means he's self-aware.

"But praise where praise is due. You've got good eyes, Major."

"…I'll try to get my brain to match."

An awfully tame response. This is less an error than a simple lack of experience.

"We have many problems with knowledge and experience. The responsibility doesn't fall entirely on you personally. Just understand the dangers of narrow-minded thinking."

…Given how fast aerial mages are, there's no way a sub operating that started at the same location could somehow get ahead of them and pick them

back up.

“Major Weiss, take this opportunity to bother some of the sailors and study up. It’s not a bad idea to learn some things about the sea given the state of the war.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good man.” She ends the conversation and tells her subordinates to remove their hats if they have them.

“Wave your caps! Caps!”

“Do you think they can see us?”

Her adjutant, interjecting, has a point. Considering the limited amount of light at this time of day, it’s possible they can’t.

“You mean you can’t conduct yourself with good manners unless someone is watching? Do you need me to reeducate you?”

“P-please have mercy.”

“I’m only joking, Lieutenant Serebryakov. But do show the proper respect to your fellow soldiers.”

“Understood.”

It’s hard to tell if my adjutant is serious or not. She’s a bit of a mystery woman. Troublingly, that’s true even though they’ve been together for so long. People truly are difficult to understand.

Kicking trivial side thoughts out of my head, I speak up again. “Are our asses safe? If we bring perverts aboard the submarine, it’ll take more than a written apology to make amends.” I crack a joke with a smile. “I don’t want to get chewed out for forcing our fellow troops to share tight quarters with a bunch of deviants.”

“How could we possibly apologize enough if we brought stalkers aboard our sub?” My adjutant laughs, catching my drift, and we manage to begin our descent in a lighthearted mood. Below, a navy officer waits with a lantern. Is that the duty officer? Look at this guy, giving us light out here where we could be discovered by the enemy at any moment.

Tanya bobs her head out of respect for his bravery and good spirits.

“Allow me to greet you on behalf of the crew. Welcome to U-091.”

“Thanks. I’m Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion under the Lergen Kampfgruppe. This is my second-in-command, Major Weiss.”

We exchange brief greetings. Formalities are actually pretty handy for

making it easier to interact with people you're meeting for the first time.

"We've been careful not to let any creeps tail us, but I can't say for sure that there are none. I hope you understand."

Adding in a light joke, I share the one worrisome issue. Proper communication is always something we should strive for. The duty officer nods in understanding.

"Understood. You can trust us to keep an eye out. Please come aboard. Although if you'd like to enjoy a cigarette or some fresh air outside, you're welcome to."

"…Oh? I was sure we'd be under way as soon as we were aboard."

A submarine floating on the surface is a sitting duck. Even if night is on its way, is it really a good idea to drift along on the surface when enemy forces may be prowling around?

Apparently, the duty officer is thinking the same thing. "About that, I don't know the details. But we've been ordered to sail on the surface. And, Colonel…er, I'm terribly sorry, but the captain has asked to see you immediately…"

"What? Er, I mean, understood."

Getting upset with the guy just doing his job is a waste of time. He fulfilled his duty as messenger. Whether you like the message or not, you have to acknowledge that the person did their job.

"Thanks. I'll go to greet him right away."

Tanya respectfully enters the submarine and then stops short. It wouldn't be bad to bring the unit in and jump straight into bed, but…safe sleep requires someone to stand on guard.

Even an ordinary night would call for someone to stand watch to make sure it's safe. Safety is the bare minimum prerequisite.

"…If it's no inconvenience to you, how about if I have someone from my unit stand on watch with magic detection?"

"Well, maritime observation is usually done navy-style…"

"Of course, we understand. You're free to use them how you like. They won't get in the way."

Keeping watch for enemies at night is a complicated affair even for veteran lookouts. And a regular submarine lookout probably isn't as used to this sort of mission as a torpedo attack squadron that has been trained specifically for night action.

On that point, aerial mages with night combat experience from the eastern front can probably do a decent job at something approaching detecting approaching enemies.

"If we need to do an emergency dive and they're moving too slow, you can just kick them overboard. Though they're trained to dive into trenches, so I doubt they'd be that sluggish."

"Are you sure? The help would definitely be appreciated."

"It's only natural to lend you a hand since we're your guests. Don't give it another thought."

Cooperation. A great human behavior based on shared interests. Tanya wants to sleep safely, and the submarine wants to navigate safely. Of course the 203rd would offer to help out.

"Major Weiss, I'm leaving the task of helping the crew keep watch to you. Three shifts are probably sufficient, but consult the crew as necessary to come up with a working plan. And this goes without saying, but do everything you can to not be a burden to them. Oh, and consider their orders to be from me. Do everything you can to make their lives easier."

"Yes, ma'am! Understood. I'll do whatever's needed."

An energetic reply. To think he has so much vim and vigor after that major fight.

Officers who have been around since the start of the war really are handy. No matter where you look in the Empire, they're probably hard to come by these days. Of course, that's exactly why the dear General Staff says they can't get us replacements…

"You might be left behind in an emergency dive!"

"No worries—we won't be late. Anyhow, I'm off to assist the navy members, ma'am."

I nod and crawl down the hatch.

At the same time, a wave of odor hits my nose; though I'm not used to it, this smell is hardly unfamiliar. Machine oil, sweat, and something stagnant. The air in a submarine is always unique like that.

Even though my nose is accustomed to the eastern front, this distinct cocktail of smells can't be easily brushed off. The hesitation I feel must be shared by my tough troops. Naturally, fully grown men are often bumping their heads on something or other inside the subs, which is also rather embarrassing.

Tanya is smaller than any sailor, so she can move through the interior with ease. After hurrying to the control room, she arrives before the captain, who is wearing a perplexed look on his face.

At this point, I'm used to career soldiers who are unsure how to react to my small frame, but if he was already perplexed before I arrived, then the cause is something else. The natural inference is that it must have to do with the reason I was summoned. Not that it's necessarily bad news.

So what in the world is it?

Though I have many questions, the first thing to do is be sociable.

I glance at his rank insignia and decide to speak first. He's the captain, after all, so it's only natural for Tanya to pay respects first.

"I'm the commander of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion under the Lergen Kampfgruppe, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff. Since we're operating as a detachment, I'm the senior officer."

"I'm the captain of U-091, Major Otto von Elm."

"It's good to meet you, Captain. We appreciate the lift. Please don't worry about us."

The height difference is usually a bit much for a firm handshake, but Elm is rather small himself, which might be partly why he's a submariner. Of course, he's still bigger than Tanya.

"To get straight to it… That was magnificent, Colonel."

"You mean the battle? From the sound of it, some people from our side were watching?"

"Yes." The captain nods almost excitedly. "Barchet was practically going mad. Ah, excuse me. We joined up at the same time, you see. He was more elated than I've ever heard him before, and we received the report of your amazing results."

In response to the captain's admiration, Tanya promptly gives him a smile. Times like this, in a submarine, being short isn't so bad. I have enough room to spread my arms and casually chuckle while saying that we didn't do anything special. "We were only able to get such good results thanks to the support of the submarine squadron. All we did was hop on the bus Major Barchet was driving to go shopping."

With no mother ship to carry us, no success would've been possible. It's the same logic as a carrier strike group. You need a proper carrier and carrier-based aircraft before either can operate in any meaningful way.

“That said…it’s true we were forced to get quite creative.”

“I’ve heard the new weapon is really something.”

“*Something* is right. I mean…” I wince before continuing with “…between you and me, we got used to doing tank desants on the eastern front, and even that was more comfortable.”

A tank desant is basically using a tank as a bus. From a mental health standpoint, it’s definitely better than taking a ride in a torpedo.

“I have no interest in riding one of those. But wow, necessity really is the mother of invention, huh?”

“It sure is. If there’s a next time, I’ve decided I’ll launch Major Barchet by force if necessary and take over the sub in his place.”

“…Luckily, though we’re in the zeros, we don’t have any V-2s on board. That means we can all be happy.”

Elm’s remark is an apt one. The most happiness for the most people. This is an outcome that all of us can be satisfied with. There is nothing better than being equipped with no V-series weapons.

The captain and I nod at each other, getting along famously. But apparently, this is surprising to Elm.

“Ah, I was nervous that you might be a stiff aerial mage. I’m glad it seems like we can get along.”

“Hmm?”

“What is it, Colonel?”

There’s not much to really say, but…after hesitating, Tanya opens her mouth to reply. “I think aerial mages in general are fairly flexible—not to mention a bunch of jokesters who can screw around with the best of the submariners.”

I’m surprised. On the entire spectrum of the imperial forces, aerial mages probably play fast and loose with regulations more than most. No one deviates from their orders, of course, but we’re the type to act within the full limits of the rules.

“The officers of my battalion like talking about their feats of bravery, but they hesitate to reveal their shame. Captain, if you could refrain from asking, that would be great.”

“I suppose most of the mages I’ve met have been from the rear. You’ve taught me that front liners are a different breed. It’s cramped here in the sub, but I hope it’ll give us a chance to get to know each other better.”

They exchange courtesies, and Tanya shifts the now nicely warmed up atmosphere toward work.

"Now then, it's nice to be social, but what's the current situation?"

Elm nods as if to say, *Of course*, and offers a slight shrug. "Honestly, it's very difficult for me to say definitively. There's a bit of a challenge, or you could call it a strange request…"

"If you'll excuse me, Captain, I'm not in the mood for wordplay. Would you get to the point?"

"You're quite right. Perhaps it would be quickest for you to take a look."

As he speaks, he hands her a securely sealed communications envelope. How thorough—there's even a document for her to confirm. This is awfully dramatic.

"It's direct from the home country, Colonel."

"How elaborate. I should sign here to confirm receipt?"

"Yes, thank you."

Upon signing and getting the confirmation document out of the way, I crack open the seal on the envelope and look over what is inside.

"…Ohhh?"

There is certainly no way to keep anything top secret in a space as necessarily intimate as a submarine, but I had planned to at least try… The moment I read the text, however, that idea goes right out the window.

"Oh-ho! This sure is something!"

The writing is crystal clear.

Nevertheless, for an order from the General Staff, it's awfully roundabout. Surprisingly, it's also pleasant.

You're really ordering me, and the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, to do *that* of all things? It's a terrific mission that words like *challenge* or *strange request* can't describe.

"Laughable, don't you think, Colonel?"

"It seems the General Staff has a sense of humor, too. Right up there with the Commonwealth. Is that why the General Staff Office's dining room has always been so horrible?"

"With all due respect, I sympathize with the army."

Lost for words, Tanya nods in silence. It's precisely because she knows how good the navy eats that even magic officer Tanya can only smile bitterly while recalling how bad the food is for the infantry.

*…Well, at least we get treated to good meals at sea* is the only consoling thought I can muster.

"Excuse me, Captain. May I confer with my subordinate outside for a moment?"

"Of course, Colonel. Go right ahead."

*Hup*—I climb up the steel ladder to the bridge to poke the officer helping keep watch. "Major Weiss, can I borrow you for a moment?"

"Yes, ma'am. What is it?"

When he lowers his binoculars, I wave the message from the envelope as if he would understand as soon as he laid eyes on it.

"Special orders from the home country."

"Special orders?" It's probably natural for the face of an officer who has just been launched into the thick of a Commonwealth fleet aboard a V-2 to stiffen in response.

"I know exactly how you feel but relax. We've been instructed to go 'sightseeing' in Ildoa… The submarine will apparently enter port 'as soon as possible.'"

I say that all with a smile only to be met with a blank, vacant stare from my vice commander. So that's what he looks like when he's caught off guard. Chuckling to myself, I thrust the document at him.

Having taken it with both hands and quickly read over it, this seasoned aerial mage is more confused than he has ever been.

"C-Colonel? What does…s-sightseeing mean?"

"It means sightseeing."

My vice commander is usually so grave and steady, but…at this point his entire body is showing his utter disbelief, so I guess he's more expressive than I thought.

"A-as in not a military sense?"

"Of course not." Tanya shakes her head. "Like the telegram says, we'll be docking with the submarine. It even says that Major Elm and the rest of U-091's crew should get spruced up in at least semiformal dress, right?"

"Honestly, I don't understand how this is an order."

"…We're supposed to openly enjoy our leave in our ally's country and pay our respects to the attaché at the embassy. Surely that qualifies as military duty."

No matter how you read it, this is nothing more than a peaceful

sightseeing mission. It's the type of formality soldiers would perform during peacetime. Absolutely wonderful!

"But we're at war!"

I get what my exasperated vice commander is trying to say. There's a war on—we're a far cry from peacetime. Such sophisticated etiquette is nothing more than mere pretension on the battlefield.

You could say it's the area the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, a combat unit, is most unfamiliar with.

"…But it's an order. It even adds this detail: 'As soon as your business is concluded, return to Empire via Ildoan state rail.' It sounds as if everything has been set up for us."

In other words, the embassy has arranged a luxury vacation for us. Not only does it come with meals and travel expenses paid, but the hotel is included, too! You can't hope for treatment that good unless you become a member of parliament.

A trip abroad on public money? I really am blessed. Given the timing, not even the emperor himself can enjoy such extravagance. That's some decent employee welfare.

"…I am, uh, having a hard time comprehending it."

"I'm sure you do." I nod in agreement. "I mean, one minute we're launched at an enemy warship in a V-2, and the next we're off on a sightseeing trip in an untrustworthy allied country on taxpayer money."

There really are some strange developments in this world. In one direction, extreme black, while in the other, pure white. Though as a public servant, I feel that the gray bits in between are plenty gray.

If you have common sense, a bit of confusion now and then is utterly normal. Tanya is a good boss filled with empathy, so she understands Weiss's feelings naturally.

"Will Ildoa even let us in? From what I'm told…"

"Major Weiss, you've been steeping in war on the eastern front for too long."

He's a good subordinate, but he must have left his brain on the battlefield. That will be hard to fix. I know that giving guidance to outstanding individuals is a profitable investment, but…with cost performance in mind, I worry about the future.

"Common sense, Major! Use your common sense!"

I give my blank-faced vice commander a light kick in the leg and sigh.

There's no point in worrying whether Ildoa might chase *allied soldiers* off. It's incredibly simple. The Empire has no options, but it's not as if Ildoa enjoys a great deal of choice, either.

That's how games work. There are rules.

"When retaliating, everything should be proportional. It's an extremely simple principle. Don't forget it, Major."

"Ma'am?"

It's the most basic of basic game theory logic.

When dealing with another party who is hesitant and too tolerant, any state is liable to become infinitely selfish. Why would you show consideration for someone who demonstrates a willingness to let anything go?

In that vein, the Empire will be a slight pain in the ass, and Ildoa will have no choice but to go along quietly.

Of course, it'll go differently if Ildoa feels like starting a war that very day…but as long as Colonel Lergen's guess isn't completely off, Ildoa will decide to remain neutral—meaning it'll have to welcome the Imperial Army Goodwill Tour Group with bouquets and smiles.

*In other words…*

"We're just teaching them a lesson for their poor manners. They'll realize it's a happy thing because it will bring us to a deal. Doing this might actually be the key to upholding world peace… At least, as long as both parties remain rational."

Rationality versus emotions. We're entering the realm of behavioral economics now. "Haaah," I sigh as I stare out at the great big ocean.

The view doesn't particularly soothe my heart, but it would be a lie to say that I don't feel jealous when I think that since nature is ruled by the laws of physics, it might actually be quite rational.

Considering what a tragedy lobotomies ended up being, it's clear that humans have no choice but to learn to get along with their emotions.

"Being unable to trust Ildoa makes me want to bring the iron hammer down on them."

"Cut it out, Major."

"Colonel?"

It's not like I don't understand how you feel, but…considering the

situation the Imperial Army is in, that's the last thing we can afford to do.

I wave a hand to silence my subordinate and then heave a huge sigh.

This must be what people mean when they say they want to burst into tears.

There's just absolutely nothing I can do. Everyone and their grandmother have abandoned logic and placed undue emphasis on emotions. Even a field officer I trained with tender, loving care and have flown alongside time and time again is no exception.

I don't know how tightly the General Staff is gripping the reins on this one, but will the home country remain prudent with its policies toward Ildoa?

"…Major Weiss. It's true that for people in the field like us, an insincere friend is more of a headache than a blatant enemy. But on the national strategy level, it's the other way around."

"What do you mean?"

"Even an insincere friend is a friend. You can strike a deal with them. All you can exchange with enemies is bullets."

Reduce the number of enemies. That's basic strategy.

True enemies can only be killed, but with insincere friends, you can at least pretend to be pals.

Of course, on the front lines those kinds of people are an absolute pain in the ass. As a field commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff, mostly concerned with the tactical layer of war, wouldn't hesitate to eliminate them all.

But on the strategic level, the wise thing to do is shake hands, even if reluctantly, and "take appropriate action." It's the shift in perspective that a change in stance brings.

"Friendship requires mutual trust. Mischief deserves a thumping, of course. It has to be proportional, though. It's never good to go overboard."

"But shouldn't we teach them a lesson so that they never betray us again?"

"That's already too much, Major."

Excessive retaliation isn't what we're after at all. If we're seen even once as incapable of hashing out a deal, they'll never want to negotiate or cooperate ever again.

"I'm sure that's what the executives in the General Staff were thinking when we blew the Entente Alliance away."

The simple thought that a spanking would do the trick. And look where that got us. This is no laughing matter.

I grumble, "Considering that's how we got to this point, I don't think it's such a bad idea to learn some restraint."

"…Forgive me."

"No, it's good to hear how you feel about it. After all…" I shrug slightly before continuing with "…my own experiences are fairly biased. The army, the General Staff, and the battlefield. I don't really have much of a sense for the rear or peacetime."

"Honestly, sentiment in the rear is too hard for soldiers to understand."

I nod. His complaint isn't difficult to fathom. "That said, the logic and thinking of the army and the political reasoning is comparatively easy to grasp."

Considering the Empire's relationship with Ildoa, appropriate retaliation might actually be beneficial in maintaining the weak alliance.

It's not a problem of ethics but of power.

"Now then, as the home country has ordered, we're off on a fun sightseeing trip. How often does a chance like this come along? Let's savor the bonds of friendship we share with our ally. Maybe we'll even be invited to dinner!"

Having said that much, I suddenly realize something.

Dinner. Dinner might actually be a thing.

"…Crap."

I have nothing to wear.

"Colonel?"

"Major, sorry to burden you, but if you happen to see Lieutenant Serebryakov—ah no, never mind. Continue keeping watch."

"Yes, ma'am. Understood."

I'm pretty sure regulations stipulate exceedingly formal dress for official dinners. I'm sure the men who serve under me can get clothes tailored to their size via the attaché at the embassy…but for someone my height…

Did someone prepare me formal wear when we were deployed?

Even if it's a single sub, the fact that we're being told to sail right into the port means we're not "escaping" but actually supposed to arrive in a dignified manner. That's clearly what the higher-ups want. Given that the idea is to harass Ildoa for their "strictly neutral" stance, haggard troops

showing up in ratty uniforms is decidedly *not* the impression we want to make.

There's probably no sense in worrying about how we'll look in photographs. I doubt we'll end up in mass media, since we can impose a media blackout under the guise of protecting state secrets.

But the Empire does have to look good for the Ildoan reception personnel.

And a good chunk of a person's impression is looks. We can't underestimate the visual factor.

I doubt we can get made-to-order three-piece suits, but we'll want something at least that formal. I don't want to be the kind of barbarian who can't even follow the dress code for state functions.

As I nimbly clamber down the ladder from the bridge, I'm burning with impatience to consult my adjutant about clothes. It'll be fine if she can arrange something, but I wonder if she can.

"…Thoughtfulness and manners, huh? Man, to think I'd be worrying about formal wear and how to behave in the rear. Seems like it's going to be a sightseeing trip with lots of things to worry about."

When it comes to the unfamiliar, it always pays to have a plan.

This is a totally different ball game from the eastern front… Wait. I freeze in the submarine corridor as if I just bit down on a lemon. Paying no attention to the sailors warily passing by, I go over something in my head, trembling all the while.

*Formal wear and the rear* and *When it comes to the unfamiliar…totally different?*

Well, those are probably allowable as far as mumbles from a frontline officer go.

For those who are broken by time spent on the front lines, those who have surrendered their body and soul to the war, surely sometimes they give voice to strange thoughts.

But *me*?

Market-loving, peace- and civilization-valuing me?

The fact that *I*, of all people, feel like dressing up in the ideal rear environment of peaceful Ildoa is something to be worried about?

This is highly abnormal.

If this weren't a cramped submarine and I weren't in a position that requires me to mind my reputation and how I come off to the troops, I would

have eschewed appearances and rushed to the nearest mental health clinic.

*This should not be a thing.*

"…Am I that far gone?"

For a salaryman, riding a packed train with the basic gear of a suit and a necktie is an everyday occurrence. Never mind how uncomfortable the packed trains are—if I can't even put on a tie, would I be able to commute…?

If putting on dress wear is really such a hardship, then that means…

"…What the hell?"

I've had no subjective symptoms, but could it be that the battlefield has finally poisoned me? This is why I hate war so much.

If we don't get this over with soon, I may actually go insane.

Remaining sane in a mad world is easier said than done. If I'm not careful, my body may survive the war without my mind. I need both to stay healthy.

If I survive but wind up non compos mentis and praising Being X…talk about putting the cart before the horse.

Freedom requires both a mind and a body.

I have to survive.

I can't give in to this crazy, broken, utterly bizarre world.

I'm going to live—I'm going to live and celebrate the triumph of reason.

I swear to defend tomorrow, the future, as well as my freedom and dignity until this is all over.

Thus, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff quietly declares her heartfelt determination.

"We have to win. Absolutely. No matter what it takes."

[ chapter ]

# V

## Sightseeing

**We're carrying out a major offensive on cheese, ham, coffee, tea, wine, bread, and desserts, too.**

**From the diary of First Lieutenant Serebryakov of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion**

# [chapter] V Sightseeing

**JULY 17, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, HEADED FOR ILDOA**

Despite the fact that U-091 under Major Otto von Elm is a standard fleet submarine, it's currently sailing openly on the surface.

A submarine that voluntarily reveals itself.

That probably sends a message in and of itself. In order to reinforce the idea of innocently passing through, it proceeds at a leisurely pace toward the horizon, leaving a small wake behind as it enters Ildoan waters.

Regardless of how it would have gone at night, if a sub is not diving but confidently flying the imperial flag as it approaches in broad daylight, Ildoa has to respond whether it wants to or not.

And Ildoan Navy HQ responds promptly.

More specifically, they broadcast a call to *guide* the *goodwill visitors* over all channels. And how kind of them to send it unencrypted as well. They send it multiple times so that the *friendly nation* is sure to pick up the message.

After enough time passes, the Ildoan fleet sends a *torpedo squadron* to greet the ship that Tanya and her unit are hitching a lift on.

Thus, receiving a *courteous welcome* from the *friendly neutral country*, and even exchanging a polite gun salute, U-091, flying its imperial and military flags, glides over the Inner Sea, announcing the Empire's presence the whole way.

The accompanying Ildoan boats surround U-091, creating a ring formation with the submarine at its center. Interpreting this kindly, for them to situate a vessel that isn't even a capital ship right in the middle, they must be *escorting* us, wary of any interference from the *Commonwealth Navy*.

Then again, their cannons are pointed ever so slightly inward. I suppose

that means we better not do anything funny?

Regardless, watching the majestic torpedo squadron's maneuvers is pleasant. The view from the deck is quite spectacular. It wouldn't be possible without the *beautiful friendship* between Ildoa and the Empire.

They're a wonderful friend. What a wonderful friend.

That's why, just in case, I have my unit lined up in ceremonial dress on the deck. *If necessary*, they're ready to scramble from the submarine, board the nearest destroyer, and fire three rounds of explosion formulas at any exposed flammables to set off secondary explosions. They're prepared for action in the most inoffensive way possible.

The most nerve-racking moment is when an Ildoan plane flies overhead. Looking at the silhouette, I spot a familiar cockade. How could I possibly miss the *This fighter plane was made in the Commonwealth* emblazoned on the plane. I'm seized by terror for an instant—until I also spot the Ildoan insignia.

A plane made in an enemy country is flying over our submarine! Seeing how nervous Elm is, his expression tense, I have to admit I understand only too well.

An enemy plane overhead is the worst situation for a submarine.

How much better I would feel if we could shoot down the wing-waving shitbirds.

"The Ildoans give intense greetings. Don't you find it impressive, Captain?"

"To be sure, Colonel. I'd like to ring the emergency dive bell out of embarrassment."

"I feel exactly the same. But we're under strict orders from the General Staff to enter port with a smile."

"Ahhh." I wince slightly. "I'm not even sure how to be friendly. I've been spending so much time deepening my friendship with the Commies out east. I don't know what else to use besides a shovel."

"A shovel?"

"Oh, maybe the navy does it differently? Soldiers on the eastern front confirm our bonds of kinship with Commies by exchanging shovel blows."

"Ah, so Rhine-style?"

"Exactly." I nod. Savagery, violence, and the abnormal have been my ever-present companions for too long.

I've come to accept that my subordinates are warped, but come to think of it, there's no guarantee that I haven't been affected as well.

Tanya winces.

"…I guess I have to at least remember how we did things during peacetime."

Of the years she has been part of the Imperial Army, they were truly at peace for less than two. Can you really afford to be choosy when it comes to work?

Something a state at war shouldn't be able to hope for: a peaceful entry at a foreign port.

The Ildoan military band grandly performs both countries' anthems, the imperial and Ildoan flags are flying high, and—astonishingly—there are even children holding bouquets at the ready.

There are no camera-wielding reporters, and the Ildoan military's presence and intent to keep a tight rein on the whole situation can be felt here and there overall… Even so, the atmosphere is relaxed.

I'll admit that this feeling is hard to put into words. The best I can do is call it "casual." It's unbelievably cheerful compared to the imperial ports, which have transformed into military black boxes to maintain absolute secrecy when warships are coming and going.

How *peaceful* Ildoa is during this war compared to the Empire.

Maybe that's why? I just realized something I expected to see that is conspicuously missing from view.

There aren't any of the familiar concrete U-boat bunkers.

Even though we're arriving in a U-boat, we're docking not in a bunker but out in the open like any other boat! It's not an exaggeration to say that this is the first time in my life that I've moored at a pier in a submarine.

As I cross the gangway to shore, it's surprisingly novel that I can see the sky overhead. It's blue. Looking up at Ildoa's clear, ultramarine sky, I can't help but feel inexplicably irritated.

It must be because a Commonwealth-made fighter plane is banking to say hello. I hope that's all it does.

It's not exactly an issue of taste, but the fact that what I assume is the

welcoming party from the military is wearing crisply starched uniforms bothers me.

Though the imperial side managed to do something about their appearance, they're still soldiers. Once they're on land, they all have to remember the manners they haven't needed to use since leaving the academy.

Though Elm represents the submarine in the meeting with the high-ranking officers who came for a courtesy visit, as long as I'm present at proceedings, I have to at least muster a salute.

It feels like it's been a strangely long time since I've seen such uncreased suits outside of photographs. And of course, the Ildoan military personnel are directing rude stares filled with surprise when they notice my short stature.

Be friendly? How am I supposed to manage that?

The only reason I'm not immediately crushed by the mounting strain is a change in the environment. An escape or perhaps a helping hand. When I finally make a run for it, thanks to embassy personnel and Colonel Calandro's planning, my gratitude is definitely heartfelt.

That's how Tanya and the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion part with Elm and the submariners to board a specially arranged train.

A fun railway tour of Ildoa! With your fun Ildoan pals! Is this how our General Staff–sponsored travels begin?

## THE SAME DAY, AFTERNOON, THE CROSS-ILDOA RAILWAY, THE DINING CAR

*Ker-clack, ker-clack. Ker-clack, ker-clack.*

The sound of the swaying train car is familiar to anyone who has traveled by rail before. Yet, Tanya has been tormented by an indescribable sense of incongruity since departing from the station.

She can't seem to relax even when guided to the dining car, which is brimming with rich aromas.

The party from the embassy are smiling pleasantly and the group with Colonel Calandro, who seem to be the welcome crew, apparently don't mind at all, but my subordinates are hesitant.

What is this strange feeling?

Maybe the gap between the front lines and the rear is just rather large—something like that?

But thinking about it doesn't help. I'll just have to dig into it later. I decide to give up for now, but when I reach for the carafe of water on the table, a thought suddenly occurs to me.

"Why is the carafe made of glass?"

It's made of glass and not securely stowed. Why would something like this be left carelessly on the table? If it were left as is and the car shook, it would break.

But inside the train swaying with its *ker-clack, ker-clack*, the carafe wobbled almost imperceptibly.

"Oh, I see."

Once I figured it out, turns out the reason was really quite simple.

"…Well, this is just…"

It's too quiet. The swaying is so slight.

If Lieutenant Colonel Uger from the Railroad Department were here, he would surely elaborate on the minute differences, but a layperson like Tanya can only recognize discrepancies on the superficial level.

Still, there is one thing I know for sure: The Ildoans are on top of their maintenance. At the very least, they're doing a far more thorough job than the Imperial Army's rails that stretch to the eastern front.

I understand in an instant what there is to envy about Ildoa's trains. They're rolling embodiments of peace. Just the fact that the rails run straight without twisting is enough to grasp the value of peace.

And Ildoans can probably get their hands on as much glass as they want.

"…I'm green with envy."

The dividends peace pays are fantastic. If possible, I'd like the Reich to profit from them even just for a day.

Having murmured that much, Tanya turns to the item she's been averting her eyes from until this moment.

Set casually in the center of the table is a beautifully woven basket. If you can believe it, inside is a mountain of bread. It's the bread of breads, made with processed white flour.

The waiter left it there saying we could help ourselves as if it were nothing.

"Help ourselves?"

In the Empire, even the classic ersatz bread, K-Brot, comes in limited supply.

Here, however, there is a dazzling array of different kinds, all the highest quality. Even if they're not freshly baked, the service people must have warmed it. The sweet fragrance in the air is a cruel assault on my sense of smell.

This scent…

How seductive. It makes me want to reach out right away.

…Aggravatingly, my lunch companion, Colonel Calandro, is *late*. What could possibly be keeping him from the dining car?

If he means to postpone this meal when I'm sitting right in front of it… I'm not averse to employing an *unfortunate stray bullet*. Well, no, I suppose that's overkill. But this is highly unpleasant.

Failing to be punctual is absolutely something I hold against people.

Right as my annoyance builds to a boil, a voice calls out to me from behind, and I straighten up.

"So sorry, Colonel Degurechaff! I seem to have kept you waiting."

"Oh…! Colonel!"

Gesturing with his right hand that I can remain seated and apologizing with his left, he sits in the seat opposite of me.

"Your home country's officials are trying to pack your schedule full of parties while you're in town."

"To think we're that popular. They want to deepen our friendship so much that it would be a shame to put us out?"

"Ha-ha, very funny, Colonel." He waves her concerns off. "It took some time, but…I finally got it through the idiotic bureaucrats' heads. I guarantee you'll be able to sightsee at your leisure. Of course"—he exaggerates his expression for effect—"I'm sure you don't want to waste your time with official welcome parties, but I did arrange one simple, unofficial dinner. Once that's done, you're truly free."

*Dinner as a formality with colleagues, and then we're let loose?!*

"I couldn't avoid at least one. Just think of it as a courtesy call and accompany me."

The plan he so nonchalantly explains is actually quite generous, considering the circumstances. I was imagining a formal tour while under

heavy surveillance, so this is unexpected.

"On behalf of my troops, thank you so much for arranging everything."

"I only did what's natural." He nods benevolently and his expression noticeably relaxes. "Now then, that's enough shoptalk. Entertaining an acquaintance who was kind to me on the eastern front is infinitely more meaningful than meeting with military bureaucrats and bashing one another over the head with stuffy decorum."

"Everything you say is so rich with implications, Colonel Calandro."

Calandro plasters on a smile to show he doesn't hate the flattery. I guess if we're going to sound each other out and still keep things pleasant, this is probably how it should go.

"But look, Colonel. This warm sunshine can make anyone a poet, an orator, or even a musician. I adore this sunny rail line."

He goes on animatedly about how Ildoa is a "world of light." He launches into a solo act, speaking at length on his feelings about the sun, history and lemons, and how wonderful blood oranges are.

Here I am, practically starving, and he's lecturing me on citrus fruits. What a guy. Just as Tanya begins having trouble keeping her cheeks from twitching, he finally brings it to a close.

"Ah." He winces, seeming to have noticed what he was doing. "Sorry, I can be a bit long-winded."

As a person with social skills, I smile vaguely and maintain my silence. It's not only pointless but actively harmful to affirm or reject monologues like this. It's much safer to smile and sip your tea.

Finally, I decide to assume an innocent expression and change the subject.

"Actually, I'm surprised. I was sure we'd be put on a military train."

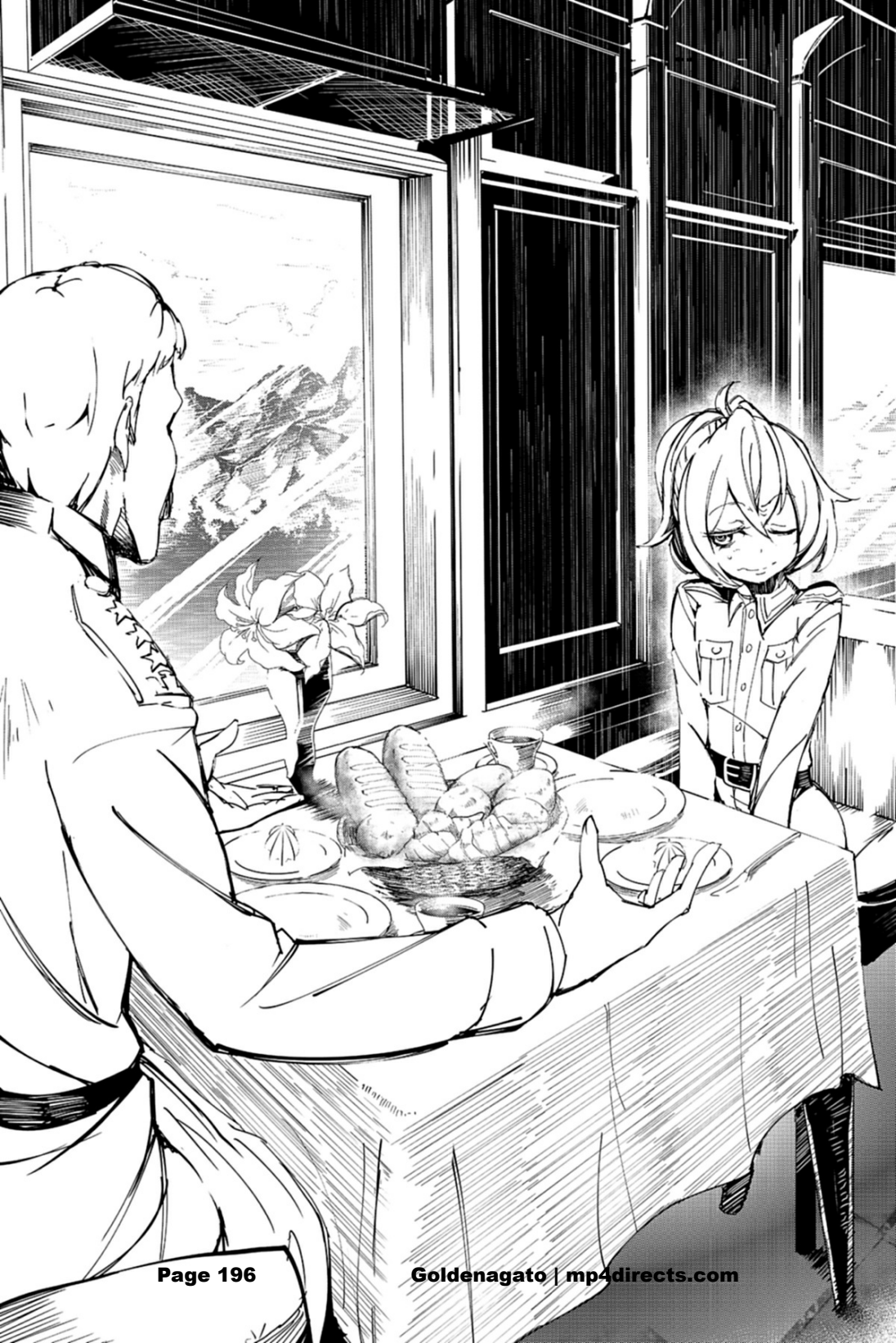
"I can't have you underestimating us like that, Colonel. I mean, this is supposed to be a sightseeing trip for honored guests from an allied nation."

Not unexpectedly, he gives a deflecting answer in response to her probing comment.

"This is a luxury Ildoan train ride. I wouldn't say it can compete with the grand welcome you offered me on the eastern front, but this isn't half-bad, right?"

"Dear me, how embarrassing. Please consider our sad offerings on the eastern front a product of the unwieldy battlefield and forgive us."

We exchange jabs, sounding each other out.

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That said, I don't hold anything against Calandro. The reverse is probably true as well.

Ildoa wants to maintain a delicate distance from the Empire and the other warring states. The Empire wants to tell them to make it clear they side with the Empire. As representatives of their respective nations, we are merely going back and forth according to the script, expressions only as serious as our salaries can afford.

But ultimately, there are no personal grudges here. Once we've said what needs to be said, I'm sure we'll do each other the favor of letting up.

"I wouldn't expect a full-course meal on the battlefield. It's peacetime here, though, so you might have doubts or reservations if we offered anything less. I hope our hospitality doesn't come up short."

"…No, Colonel. I'm enjoying myself very much at the moment."

"Don't be too hasty. The welcome banquet hasn't even started yet!"

Tanya glances away in silence.

As if she could possibly admit that she was enjoying the fragrance of the bread. It's probably a good time to change the subject.

"Could I see the menu?"

"Of course. What would you like?"

"I'm fresh off the battlefield. I'll eat anything edible." I smile awkwardly and decide to ask a question to be polite. "And I still have the habit of collecting information. May I have your recommendation, Colonel?"

"Certainly. I'm happy to recommend something."

"Thank you."

"Not at all. Hmm, what do I recommend…? All the seafood is delicious. Not that the meat is bad…" After a moment, he makes his declaration. "The fish here is exquisite. My personal opinion is that very few fish are truly tasty, so you have to enjoy them when you get the chance."

"That's a strong recommendation. Is the fish really that good?"

"I'm glad you asked!" answers Calandro happily. "A train departing from a navy port is no exception. Each unit takes great care when procuring seafood. They're all really something."

"The army assists in procurement?"

"No, not like that." He lowers his voice a bit and confides in an amused tone, "On an individual level… As a soldier in the field yourself, I'm sure you know how it goes, Colonel Degurechaff."

“You mean stealing?”

The loud clap of his hands sounds. Then he puts on an ambiguous smile. “Those gluttons who run the kitchen have many friends.”

“They must get along really well if they offer up fish for dinner.”

“They’re masters of the great game. The kitchens here always have fish as good or even better than what you can find at the port.”

Fresh fish anytime.

The security of a perpetual source of desirable goods, a good connect.

“How scandalous.”

“Is the Empire any different?”

“Ha-ha-ha!” I laugh off the comment and finally take a look at the menu. It’s true that the same kind of thing occurs in the Empire. If you personally know the person in charge, anything can be streamlined.

As someone who has mutual understanding with high-ranking officers in the General Staff such as Lieutenant Colonel Uger and Colonel Lergen and had an easier time getting supplied as a result, I’m not really in any position to talk.

“Colonel, though we serve different flags, we’re both soldiers.”

“The stomach and the army—two topics that can’t really be rhetorical. Reality is no fun, and they conform to reality.” Tanya smiles faintly at Calandro. “After all, I’d rather have three square meals than romance. It’s only a matter of course that the ones with full stomachs should come out on top.”

Just look at warm meals. How difficult it is to prepare nutritious ingredients, acquire the fuel to heat them, and supply them to the troops without anything going wrong!

With fresh seafood, getting it to the front lines would be an enterprise on par with sending a probe to the moon. Which is why the guys from finance in the home country tell us to make do with K-Brot.

“I guess I’ll take full advantage of this rare chance and try this marinade.”

“Oh, an adventurous eater? You’re a rare one. I’ve heard most people from the Empire are fairly conservative when it comes to food.”

“Enjoying the flavors of a different land is about the only fun a soldier in the field can look forward to.”

“With a career like yours, I suppose that’s true. You must be enjoying all the different flavors everywhere you go. And I bet you’ve got quite a

discerning palate."

*If I were eating nice things, sure* is the barbed comment I swallow in silence. No need to openly broadcast how egregious imperial logistics are.

Unless some true divine intervention occurs, the only foreign food I get to enjoy at all comes from seized canned goods.

Or provisions requisitioned locally.

Depending on the time and place, locally requisitioned provisions can be tasty, but…usually it's just the sort of thing you'd expect.

"By the way, Colonel. I'll have fish for my main, but…I'm also quite excited about the opening skirmish."

"A sharp observation, Colonel. You don't let any details slip past you." The happily smiling Ildoan begins speaking on the charms of meat. "For an appetizer, maybe a light tartare? What do you think? It's a bit different from in the Empire…but they get quality steak. I praised the fish, but the meat is also quite good."

"Is it more about making the most of the natural flavors, or is there a secret sauce?"

"Colonel, I hardly need to tell you this, but…there's the term *fog of war*. You can't always get the information you want."

Calandro seems to be enjoying himself, and I honestly don't see anything wrong with going along. So Tanya nods.

"Then I guess it's time for an officer patrol."

"Indeed. Your choice?"

"When in Rome, do as the Romans. I think I'll eat what the Ildoans often do, since it's not like I get the chance every day. I'll try the tartare and the marinade. Oh. Of course, you'll allow me to add that I expect it to be delicious?"

"I guarantee it, Colonel Degurechaff. For someone who isn't used to it… the flavors might be a bit strong. The fresh fish marinade is absolutely fantastic, though."

Upon taking their order, the waiter promptly serves a light potage. It's clear that this is similar to what we'd call *surinagashi* in Japan.

Even from this fancy first dish, the care and skill that went into the preparation is immediately apparent.

Will this be any good…? I didn't have particularly high expectations, but reality has served up a bitter truth along with the savory dish. This appetizer,

the tartare, has been served boldly with only salt and pepper to taste.

This dish is so simple that if the meat were poor quality, it would be completely inedible…but instead, I find myself impressed by its concentrated umami.

Above all, the faintly stimulating spices that bring out the sweetness of the meat! The way this heightens your appetite is nothing like poor-quality tartares that mask the raw funkiness of the meat with generous helpings of pepper.

With a tongue used to bratwurst made of odds and ends, I nearly get bowled over by the palpable taste of civilization. I'd nearly forgotten what fine dining was like, and the excellence nearly makes me drool.

It's so good.

It's good, full stop, no disclaimers.

Paired with a crisp baguette, it's perfect. This is what it means to want to eat every last drop of sauce. How pleasant it is to be able to scatter bread crumbs on the table without violating any etiquette. And even better, lightly sparkling water is served intermittently by the incredibly attentive waitstaff.

I'm used to drinking muddy water, but here I can taste the sweetness of the minerals so clearly it's almost irritating.

Ildoan meat is formidable.

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff gives her honest impressions to Calandro and extends her unstinting praise to the chef.

"Colonel, if your palate is that discerning, then the main dish… Actually, no. It would be tactless to put it into words now. Please just have a taste."

As if taking Calandro's comments as a cue, the waiter brings out the white fish marinade.

I'm not certain, but it seems like sea bass? There are many ingredients I've never seen before used in this presentation-conscious dish.

Of course, by this point, I can't rule out the possibility that it looks better than it tastes.

Though I've grown accustomed to this world's standards, I'm still essentially Japanese, and I think I'm quite demanding when it comes to any type of fish dish. It looks like it's been cooked nicely through. And the way the white flesh is plated demonstrates decent skill.

But there are few sauces that go well with fish.

*Even if Ildoans give it their seal of approval…*

That's the arrogant thought that crosses my mind as I take a bite, but then I'm struck by amazement.

The first thing I taste is a refreshing acidity. Citrus. Probably lemon. While the flavors are complex and layered, they come together in my mouth to perform an immaculately composed concerto.

I maintain a degree of composure as I analyze that initial bite, but what's truly astounding is the sauce covering my taste buds.

Upending the preconception I held that sauces are these heavy condiments, the marinade is a delicate mix of salty and sweet, some olive oil, and a dash of vinegar that come together to create a complex, multilayered flavor. It's soaked into the fish and melts along with its fat in my mouth.

What a superb melody.

And by no means is the sauce too light. Yet, if asked whether it's heavy, I would definitely say no. It retains a freshness, something that enhances the fish's charm beyond its natural limitations.

What could it be? Putting this flavor into words seems like a silly exercise.

Certainly, for a main, it seems light on its own. But only until you put it in your mouth!

Once it's on your tongue, you have no choice but to experience the rich flavor permeating the white flesh.

Sweetness, acidity, and most important of all, umami—this dish achieves a perfect harmony.

No wonder Calandro was going on about the sun and citrus fruits earlier. This is a flavor worthy of that monologue.

I help myself to the sparkling water and reset my palate before diving back in. The second bite of the sauce-covered white flesh is no less impressive than the first. The savory taste doesn't scatter but remains neatly bundled.

The most surprising aspect is the immaculate balance.

When saliva production increases and the tongue rebounds from the first impact, that's when the second layer of umami presents itself. The lightness of the sauce allows the flavor of the fish itself to come through beautifully as well, never overpowering it.

"Well, how is it? From where I'm sitting, you seem satisfied…"

"For the first time in my life, the word *surrender* crossed my mind. I am

thoroughly defeated."

"It's good enough to make the Empire's Silver Wings admit defeat, hmm?" Calandro chuckles in amusement. "The chef's valorous deed will be the stuff of legend. Fascinating!"

He murmurs it casually. Though the Ildoan colonel is implying many things with that offhand comment, it's probably just to keep the conversation moving. I could let it go.

But hearing an Ildoan talk about "valorous deeds" gives Tanya pause as someone who's been covered in mud on the front lines.

"Valorous deed?"

"You fight with guns and the chef fights with his knife skills. They're not so different at the end of the day."

"…All men are equal on the receiving end of an artillery barrage, and it's not such a bad thing. You Ildoans are welcome in our trenches anytime."

Even after taking that jab, Calandro hardly reacts as he reaches for his glass of red wine.

The way he leisurely brings the glass to his lips the moment the waiter deftly tops it off can only mean he is ignoring her comment. Apparently, Ildoans are ever true to their raison d'état.

"Colonel, ultimately, that gap is what separates me and you. We live in the same world, but sadly we breathe very different air."

"You're quite right."

"That said, perhaps I went too far. I hope you'll forgive me."

"No, I'm also at fault. Perhaps I got too comfortable and let my tongue slip with you because we spent some time on the eastern front together."

A friendly apology offered as social etiquette dictates.

As long as he doesn't bear Tanya any personal ill will, it'd be preferable to get along with him. That's how I feel about the matter.

After all, it's wonderful to have a connection in a neutral country.

In wartime, that's incredibly valuable. She wants to take this rare opportunity of the sightseeing trip through Ildoa to become closer. Which is why she politely stands.

"That was delicious."

"It was perfect aside from the conversation, right?"

I hum in response and bow. "The fish was delectable. Please tell the chef I'll be looking forward to the next meal. For now, I'd better be going."

The members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion who were on board the train were given exclusive access to two luxury train cars. Two first-class cars. And from the interior, you'd think they were furnished for generals.

After leaving the dining car and sitting down in her luxury compartment, Tanya heaves a sigh.

Honestly, I can't relax.

This is too uncomfortable.

No, there's nothing wrong with the service. The seats are comfy; I'm being waited on hand and foot like a high-ranking officer.

Truly, I have no complaints.

What they call "post-meal service" is brought by a serving boy, and the coffee and cinnamon biscuits are high quality.

It's like they're deliciousness given shape and form.

I'm not averse to admitting they've done a great job. The rear is peaceful, civilized, and above all, rich. This is the embodiment of all that Tanya longs for.

"That's why it's so painful… How could I…?"

I'm jealous. To think I'd be overtaken by such an irrational emotion.

"So now even good food is a problem?"

The delicious coffee rubs the difference between us and them in my face. Flavors are honest. They can't be faked so easily.

"The minimum required for meals" is only slightly removed from "the minimum required for civilized meals," but the two are worlds apart. People say that you cannot live on bread alone, but…in this world, Being X probably doesn't understand that, even though it should be obvious.

There are some minimum basics to reality that are indispensable in order to have freedom of spirit.

"I guess I'm tired."

"Colonel? Is something wrong?"

When the worried voice addresses Tanya, she notices the head of her adjutant poking into her compartment.

"Oh, Lieutenant Serebryakov. It's nothing major."

"I see… Are you all right?"

Apparently, she's a bit—no, she's probably quite concerned for me. Well, I suppose it's natural to feel uneasy if your superior officer starts grumbling to herself.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant. There's really no problem."

"But lately your mood has been sort of… You seem down…"

Actually, until they were ordered to go sightseeing, I'd been extremely conscious of how others saw me. You could say Tanya managed to look the part of the ideal officer, unwavering and always brimming with confidence.

Unfortunately, the shock of this Ildoa trip is really starting to show. I thought I had a thick exterior, but it seems to be surprisingly fragile.

"No, I was just thinking to myself." *I'm just human, too* is left unspoken. "Away from the battlefield, I have extra time. So I have lots of time to think. Since I'm not usually at that sort of leisure…I think about different things than I usually do."

The elaborately packaged product is so elegant, it's hard to believe these are biscuits like you'd find in a simple wrapper in the Empire.

"For instance, when I think about the flavor of one of these cookies…"

"Yeah, the food was really good. I heard that if you ask, you can get chocolate, too."

"Is Ildoa being that thoughtful? Maybe I'll have some myself."

They're probably doing it to show off, but as someone who's grown accustomed to shortages, I know that it's best to grab while the grabbing's good.

"I'm also going to find a way to get ahold of tea leaves and coffee beans. The dining car here is serving some really nice stuff."

"If possible, I'd like to bring back some white sugar. It would make a nice souvenir."

"Understood, ma'am."

I'm sure my smiling adjutant will make arrangements for everything.

That said, an imperial soldier bringing sugar as a souvenir! Even though before this total war, the Empire was totally self-sufficient with domestically produced beet sugar!

How things have changed.

One step over the border into Ildoa and you can get anything you want! There's not enough of anything in the Empire!

Despite being right next door, this is something we can't reach; the truth

is surprisingly upsetting. Tanya almost reaches for her hair to pull on it but stops with a sigh.

Is this jealousy? Resignation? I hate being so greatly affected that I can't even pin down my own emotions. It's really quite unpleasant.

Tanya shakes her head.

In the end, if I don't want to cling to the likes of Being X, my only choice is to walk my own path.

You can't change the circumstances of your birth, but you can change your fate. Or at least, I intend to.

I was born to the warring states period of the Empire and joined the army to avoid being conscripted as an orphan. I'm glad that now, having secured myself some measure of status, I can afford to take a moment and think about what comes next.

The Empire, or rather, the imperial soldier Tanya, actually has a moment to consider the future.

"…So the hourglass that was almost running out can still be flipped, huh?"

## JULY 18, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL ARMY SOUTHERN ARMY GROUP, FORMER REPUBLIC NAVY PORT AIN DEFENSE ZONE

"Their uniforms are neat anyhow."

Having been assigned to the harbor garrison, the first thing Captain Meybert and First Lieutenant Tospan found strange was the perfectly ordinary uniforms of their fellow soldiers.

Well-starched shirts and slacks, tidy caps, polished boots. This array of infantry looked so soldierly in their uniforms, it was as if they had stepped out of a photograph. Accustomed to the eastern front, it was hard for them to believe these were not toy soldiers but the harbor garrison.

No, they weren't the only ones. All the troops in the Lergen Kampfgruppe had been stunned the moment they laid eyes on the port garrison.

It all started with goodwill from above.

After enduring fierce fighting on the eastern front, half the Lergen Kampfgruppe was sent to the rear as part of their leave rotation and reorganized.

At the time, the artillery and infantry were assigned to port duty. Meybert and Tospan both welcomed this vacation of ostensibly being assigned to guard duty in the rear.

Unfortunately, Captain Ahrens and the armored forces alone were…sent to a training field in the vicinity of the capital to reconstitute their unit.

The artillery and infantry erupted in cheers, while the tank operators despaired—*You've gotta be kidding!* The reason being, the closer proximity to their home country, the more strictly regulations were enforced.

At that point in time, the ones assigned port duty laughed that since they would be able to enjoy the bounty of the sea, they were better off than the armored troops, who would end up covered in dirt on the training grounds.

But their high spirits only lasted until they saw their colleagues.

The Lergen Kampfgruppe had made a name for themselves on the eastern front, but the sight of the port garrison gave them shivers. The fact that their gear was all outdated created a strange mix of old and young that was absolutely bizarre. There were plenty of other issues to point out as well. But there was something else that blew those minor concerns out of the water.

Properly pleated uniforms! Pants so straight they begged the question, *Did they iron them?!* Boots polished till they shined like mirrors! And on top of that, not a single speck of mud on any of them!

It was impossible for a foot soldier to look like that. Maybe the honor guard at a funeral but the port garrison? To the soldiers who had been fighting in the east, it was literally inconceivable.

You can't fight a war in a clean uniform.

Wars are hopelessly muddy affairs. Officers are no exception—not even generals. Yes, the outstanding high-ranking general on the eastern front, Lieutenant General Zettour himself, went around in a worn field uniform soaked with mud and sweat.

The reality was that all the mid-ranking officers on the eastern front had to worry about socks. Returning from the front and heading to occupied territory in the rear, the glimpse of the port garrison made their jaws drop. *They're swaggering around in starched uniforms?*

It felt terribly removed from the real world.

But the true surprise was finding out that they were under strict orders from port command to wear their uniforms that way. The moment they moved into the port defense facility they had been posted at, the Lergen Kampfgruppe troops were forced to grapple with the unbelievable cultural gap.

Most of the remarks the deputy commander, Tospan, exchanged with Meybert were about this shock. More accurately, he was simply griping, but anyhow…

This day was no different.

"These crisp uniforms are great, but…I just can't relax." Tospan cringed as he looked down at his own clothes. What he saw was an ironed uniform worn to regulation standards.

It looked good, but that's also all it was good for. Putting in an effort to keep uniforms sanitary was one thing. This struck him as wasted energy.

With that bitter expression on his face, he grumbled to the superior officer. "Captain, how are we supposed to relax like this? We're supposed to be on vacation; this is too stiff."

"It's the rules, Lieutenant Tospan."

Seeing that the artillery captain was serious, Tospan shrank slightly. *With all due respect* went both ways.

"Then, Captain Meybert, please allow me to point out one thing."

"Are you saying I made a mistake?" He shook his head. "Pretty sure I didn't."

But Tospan cautiously replied, "It's…your cap. There was a notice that we're not supposed to make them crushers…"

"What?"

Tospan was pointing at the cap worn in the popular style on Meybert's head.

This trick was popular on the front lines for reducing hat maintenance time as well as its weight… That was, strictly speaking, against regulations.

"It's against the rules. They notified us not to deform our caps."

"Ngh, they did? I was just wearing it the way we all did on the eastern front…" Meybert reached for his hat with a grimace. "Dang." He had fully intended to follow the regulations to the letter. He thought he was a total stickler, but it turned out he had deviated at some point without even realizing it.

"…I don't 'reinterpret' the regulations as I see fit like Colonel Degurechaff, but she does appear to have rubbed off on me."

Sometimes the captain struggled under their extremely utilitarian superior officer, though maybe it was more that she was too good at remaining totally unsentimental.

"I'm just complaining. Though our commander really is one of the finest superior officers you could ask for, she…"

"Yeah, there are definitely some…quirks."

They went back and forth—*Right? Seriously*—taking advantage of their boss's absence to talk freely.

"What is it about her…? Is it that she's too much of a patriot?"

"She doesn't hesitate at all."

"That's it, Lieutenant. Everything gets filed under 'duty to the state.' It's the way she believes without a shred of doubt that necessity can justify anything…"

*She catches on to everything remarkably quickly, but she's also liable to go off the rails at the drop of a hat. I guess by following her example, I've gotten a bit too creative*, Meybert thought with a wince.

"That must be why living according to regulation is a pain now. In that sense, I'm really jealous of Captain Ahrens."

"Seriously. I don't mean to be rude, but…it's because the tankers are everybody's favorite."

"They may be right near the capital, but it's a maneuvering range! No one's going to make a fuss if they're out getting dirty, rolling around in their tanks."

Though they were all part of the reorganizing group, there were differences between the gunners, infantry, and tankers. It made sense that they would be sent to different places out of practical necessity. To hold ground with numbers, of course it would be the infantry. And the second-largest arm was the artillery. That was why Tospan and Meybert took charge of the Kampfgruppe while the aerial mages and tank units were operating elsewhere.

And they learned something while they were under the command of a different unit. They both agreed: *It's surprising how free we were under Colonel Degurechaff.*

"At first, I was happy we'd get to work somewhere so calm it might as

well be the rear."

"Yeah, I thought it sounded like a sweet setup."

*But no.* They both winced.

"I can't help but feel stressed when things are this different. How about you, Lieutenant?"

"So it's the same for you?"

"I mean…it's not horrible. I just can't seem to feel comfortable. I thought I was used to regulations, but my body is screaming with the effort to live on the clock." As Meybert spoke, he shrank in embarrassment. "I'm forcing myself to adjust."

"With all due respect, Captain, do you think anyone who could get used to this belongs in our Kampfgruppe?"

"…Come to think of it, you may have a point."

If Tanya had seen him laughing, she probably would have said, *So you think that, too?* and approached him as if she'd found a new friend.

While Tospan and Meybert chatted, they relaxed and let themselves be sloppy, but they kept their eyes peeled. Tanya once wondered if she would even be able to find a use for these two, but their deeply worried faces showed how concerned they were. It was an anxiety on a whole other level.

It was popularly known as the field gap—the result of officers of the field army paying high tuition fees to the teacher known as experience. After developing into officers who were regularly allowed some measure of discretion, the strictest application of rules became stifling.

"…Captain, the rear is…how should I put it?"

"I know what you're getting at, Lieutenant. It's a lot different from what we remembered, eh?" Meybert smiled wryly, having guessed what Tospan was saying.

"Before, this used to be where we belonged. But then all of a sudden, us returnees turned into foreigners."

Getting knocked around in combat changed people, shaped them to better fit the battlefield.

The fact that Meybert and Tospan were having trouble acclimating made them finally realize what felt off.

"Foreigners?"

"There's no other word for it."

"…I don't really get it. At least…I can't put it into words as easily as you,

Captain…”

“Would you say you fit in here, Lieutenant Tospan?”

“No, it’s not that. I just think ‘foreign’ is a bit much. That said, I do feel like the atmosphere here is strange and unfamiliar.”

Tospan nodded at Meybert’s remark. They had grown used to being soldiers, or perhaps simply humans, who lived and breathed on the eastern front. Of course, individual mileage may have varied.

Different intensities, individual thresholds, and perhaps the way they viewed things…

“But do you feel off like I do?”

“Well, yes, I do. Because…”—Tospan nodded—“…yeah, I can’t seem to relax, either. It feels strange.”

There was a gap.

And irreconcilable differences.

But Meybert and Tospan could agree completely—that they couldn’t settle down.

Having acclimated to the eastern front, both of them had similar thoughts on being assigned to a port city as part of the garrison during their rotation off the front.

From the exceptional environment of the eastern front lines they had grown so used to, to a rear area near the home country…

For them, these days of calm were a parade of new surprises and embarrassments.

Even though they should have belonged in this world and indeed came from it or places just like it.

The main reason they couldn’t settle in was that there were no enemy attacks. Though it was occupied territory, this former Republic port city near the home country was at “peace.”

Thanks to which, simple security missions and the like were done very differently. On the eastern front, they needed to constantly keep watch for partisans, so it was a totally different world. Though they were told the main mission of the guards was to “prevent trouble” with the current residents of this comparatively friendly occupied territory, they genuinely wondered what they were supposed to do.

For example, anyone acting suspiciously in a restricted zone was immediately shot. The Lergen Kampfgruppe had soaked up to their waists in

the quagmire of the east, and in the infantry missions there, security meant not letting the enemy come anywhere near—it was necessarily about elimination of any potential threats.

Those same fellows were now frantically ingesting the chapter of the security manual titled "Rules Regarding the Handling of Suspicious Civilians."

The second bewildering factor worthy of mention was the totally mundane pace of daily life here: waking up to the bugle call in the morning, eating breakfast in the barracks, grabbing lunch at the appointed hour, then the evening meal, and finally lights out.

In other words, the barracks life of moving according to the clock.

There would never be an order to *Take a nap!* here. In this orderly world, fit to a mold, commands ruled over time itself. As Meybert and Tospan complained to each other that they would never get used to this, the clock's hands chased them through the barracks.

But having too much free time wouldn't make you a good officer.

They always had enough time and energy to observe what was going on around them. And naturally, if they were observing, they would come up with ways to improve things. And there was no point in leaving soldiers idle.

If they were going to be made to waste time, it would be better to have them do something.

Even if there was no reason for it, they'd rather be digging a foxhole or something than twiddling their thumbs standing around. That was what Meybert had been thinking when he had the idea of building up their position.

"Lieutenant Tospan, today I'd like the infantry to lend me a hand." Meybert made the request to his Kampfgruppe mate matter-of-factly. "The defenses around the guns have been bothering me. We probably can't fortify them with *béton*, but I'd like to do what we can."

"We're at your service."

"Great. I'd like to have your infantry company pile up sandbags."

Tospan nodded. "That's enough?"

Meybert laughed. "Better than what we have now."

To both of them, it was really just a little job. *Rather than leaving the soldiers idle for the day, why not put them to work?* is what they thought.

If Tanya was there to see them, she probably would have chuckled at how

Keynesian it was.

The nonlaughing matter was how different the person in charge was. The port garrison was managed by the imperial bureaucracy—a gathering of people who did the stupidest things with the straightest faces.

For better or worse, Meybert and Tospan were completely used to having a superior officer who deviated from the norm. Unfortunately, they ended up butting heads with the much more vertically structured bureaucracy.

The first clash came while they were having their troops carry out Meybert's plan.

The work was simple: Fill the bags they had procured with dirt and pile them up. There was no other way to interpret what was going on.

But a navy administrative official who happened to pass by asked in confusion, "Captain Meybert? Excuse me, but, uh, what are you doing?"

"This?"

"Yes, that."

*Anyone can tell just by looking, so why is he going to the trouble of asking?* Cocking his head, Meybert nevertheless gave the man a polite explanation. They were simply building up their position ever so slightly, he explained concisely.

And upon hearing that, the uniformed prefect frowned. Meybert didn't understand what the issue was, and the navy administrative officer sighed at him.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but is there a problem?"

"Captain, you ask if there is a problem. Well, yes, there's a major problem."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I truly have no idea what it is. Can you explain?"

"You really don't know? …This guy." Another ostentatious sigh. After his exaggerated lament, he thrust his hand into his bag and pulled out a booklet. "Please read the rule book. It clearly states that to modify defensive facilities like this, you need to apply for permission in writing."

"…I don't believe I've received that booklet…"

"So the General Staff made an administrative error?" Cocking his head slightly, the administrative officer continued fussing with a sour look on his face. "Either way, we can't have you ignoring the rules simply because you didn't know they existed."

"You mean we need permission even just to put up some sandbags? We

can't report it afterward?"

"This isn't the battlefield. We aren't in a position that requires deviating from regulations. Captain, sorry, but I'll say this for your benefit. Please follow procedure."

After handing over the rule book or whatever it was and delivering the parting remark of "Thanks for your cooperation," the navy administrative officer left. Watching him go, Meybert heaved a sigh.

*Right, this is a navy garrison.* It made sense that they would want to be informed. It was also true that Meybert hadn't been informed about the rule book or whatever it was.

And maybe systematically, it made sense for him to be scolded for his rule violation.

But something about it didn't sit right with him.

*Paperwork is higher priority than anything else, and work on the ground can only begin after receiving written permission?* That was unthinkable on the eastern front. Before the necessary paperwork could be delivered, they would have been overrun by Communists.

Or the bureaucracy's papers would be prioritized above necessities and put a strain on the supply network. Horrifyingly, a bureaucrat might actually choose the latter.

*So the front and the rear are this different?*

Meybert reluctantly raised his voice to call the lower-ranking officer. "Lieutenant Tospan! Come here!"

As the first lieutenant trotted over, there was a look of puzzlement on his face. Of course there was. There was no way Tospan could predict why he was being summoned.

"Hold off on the fortification work. Gather up the infantry and put them on standby."

"Did something happen?"

"I'll say." He scrunched his shoulders up.

"Apparently, we're not allowed to build any fieldworks without paperwork… The navy's way of doing things is so confusing."

"Huh?"

"I've been told that we're not allowed to modify the position without written permission."

Tospan was cocking his head as though he didn't understand. "We're just

piling up sandbags. We need permission for that?"

"That's right, Lieutenant."

Tospan recoiled in disbelief, and he shook his head. "…We have to get permission for every little thing? Seriously? I can't believe that."

"Well, the administrative officers here can. Their common sense is just different. Until the papers come together, you can have the troops go back and rest in the barracks."

"Understood," Tospan acknowledged and started withdrawing the troops.

Meanwhile, Meybert set about gathering the necessary paperwork. *I'll just get it over with. I want the troops to start work again as soon as possible…* He confronted the task enthusiastically, but he was met with an unfortunate truth.

Bureaucracy was an enemy every bit as powerful as the Federation Army.

The applications needed to be formatted with exacting detail. The ones Meybert was filling out had spaces to write the general outline of the work and required a list of running expenses, materials, and so on.

They weren't building a concrete fortification, or setting up a sophisticated multiline position, or laying land mines.

All they had planned to do was pile up sandbags. The only materials involved were the cloth bags. Then it was just a matter of filling them with whatever dirt was nearby and stacking them together. The soldiers already had their own shovels.

That could fit on a single notepad page.

Strangely, though, when filling out official paperwork, what should have fit on a single notepad page required ten different forms that each had to be filled out according to their own specifications.

Even filling sandbags with dirt was "formal" in the rear.

"…Source of the dirt? Confirmation of ownership, existing defense plan, multiple checks of the construction plans?"

The byzantine formalities were dizzying. *Maybe it would be faster to fill the bags with these papers than the dirt!* The procedures made him want to mutiny.

Before he knew it, more time than expected had passed, and the work was even further behind than anticipated.

Perhaps concerned about his progress, Tospan showed up. "It's Lieutenant Tospan, Captain. How's the paperwork coming along?"

“It’s not. I’m this close to giving up.”

“Shall I help? Not that I’m great at paperwork…”

“I’m not, either.” Recalling an officer who seemed to fly through tasks of this sort, Meybert smiled awkwardly. “Lieutenant Serebryakov has been an adjutant for a long time. I bet she would have been able to sort this out pretty quick. No wonder Colonel Degurechaff values her so highly.”

He had originally thought she was just an outstanding mage, but she was actually far more than that. She was always making arrangements with astonishing efficiency. If he was being honest, he had assumed those tasks were little things anyone could do…

“I guess even minor tasks become a tactical threat when they pile up. All right, Lieutenant Tospan, can you work on that one?”

“Understood.”

They grumbled, but they had no choice but to keep working.

If you’re going to fire on the enemy, you can’t be defeated by the weight of the shells you’re trying to load. He may have been a captain, but he was an artilleryman. Meybert was plenty capable of loading and shelling.

A pen, on the other hand, is light. It was so light, yet he couldn’t seem to make any progress. To think that simply being unaccustomed to something could slow a person down this much.

For a while, he sat at his desk in the command post facing the sea.

Drawing up a regulation work plan and committing it in writing on all the various forms to be turned in for review was taxing enough to exhaust him.

“Agh, this nitpicky rule book is such a pain. You need all this just for a construction proposal?”

He murmured, but he kept his hands moving.

To Meybert, the biggest threat was the classification system. According to regulations, there were twelve different types of sandbags, and the form demanded he specify exactly which type would be used.

“…My head hurts. I thought I would get killed in action, but it seems like this paperwork might get me first.”

Meybert and Tospan were used to the higher-ups demanding too much. On the eastern front, they often received horrible orders like *Defend your position to the death*.

But being told to dig in and hold position no matter what happened didn’t seem so bad after filling out countless papers with detailed notes according to

rule such and such from some book.

"On the eastern front, aside from a single written order, even holding out at all costs was at the discretion of those in the field. Having to do all this busy work for every little thing is just… It's crazy."

Shaking his head, Meybert reached for the carafe of water to take a break. They could have as much fresh water as they wanted. Only in a garrison was such luxury possible. Hooray for running water.

Cold water really does wonders for a weary mind.

"Lieutenant Tospan, how's it going on your end?"

The equally tired-looking lieutenant answered that he wasn't making much progress. Meybert offered him the carafe, and they both helped themselves to some water.

"I thought I knew how field engineer stuff worked…" *But everything here is different.* Tospan sighed, staring at the handbook. Meybert felt the same way.

"However body movements go, at least the way pens move here is something else. I mean, if I'm laying land mines, of course I'll make a map, but…"

Everything was so time-consuming; he just couldn't get used to it.

After spinning the gears in his head so much, he thought he would look out to sea for a change, but when he did, he noticed something strange on the horizon.

"Hey, what's that?"

A couple of specks were floating on the water.

He grabbed his trusty binoculars and jumped up, calling over to an orderly as he raced to the window.

"Hey! Is there a convoy registered to come at this time? Check the list!"

"One moment, sir. I'll—"

"On the double!"

Though he was shouting and hurrying his subordinate…it wasn't as if he was that worried. It was simply a conditioned response to keep his mind stimulated and alert—at this stage anyway.

After all, the units of the Lergen Kampfgruppe were outsiders. Unless there was a notice from port command to man their battle stations, it didn't make much sense to get flustered on their own.

Still…even if he had simply misremembered, it was strange that he

couldn't recall any scheduled arrivals at all.

And it bothered him even more because he had just been criticized for his lack of attention to details. Was this a failure of communication, or was this something that had completely slipped his mind? If the latter, it was nothing more than his personal mistake, but if it was the former, it was a major issue.

Either way, to prevent the problem from recurring, he needed to get to the bottom of it.

"Captain, apologies for the delay. It says here on the list that—"

"Thanks, what ships are expected to dock?"

"It's strange. The list from command only shows a few submarines…"

"Give it here." He snatched the document from the orderly, and upon glancing over it himself, he snapped, "I'm pretty damn sure those aren't submarines."

The only unit expecting to enter the port was a group of submarines. And there was a note that said they *might* come in the event of an emergency. If it were an emergency, he could imagine the case where the submarines would sail across the surface.

But this was clearly something else.

"Any signal?"

"Nothing on the wireless. Should we hail them?"

"…That's HQ's job. Observing is enough. Have the unit ready to move if need be."

With a salute, his man got to work. After seeing him off, Meybert suddenly thought of something. There was no reason he would mix up submarines and some other type of ship.

Visibility was good. There was no chance that he misidentified their silhouettes. More than anything, submarines weren't that big. If they were signaling to identify themselves, it would be easier to tell, but without that…

"They have to be something else. Transport ships? Damn it, I'm no good at telling navy vessels apart…" Peering through his binoculars, he spotted something that appeared to be a mast but sighed with the effort it took to perform the decidedly unfamiliar task. "Looks like there are transport ships in the rear, too. And it does look like a regular convoy. But…a convoy? Now?"

"Oh, I know. The colonel and the others were being sent to the southern continent, right? Maybe it's a convoy withdrawing from there…" Tospan suggested one possibility from where he was watching from the side.

“A convoy withdrawing from the southern continent?”

“Yes, Captain. If they are friendly ships, then couldn’t that be a possibility?”

The lower-ranking officer offered an explanation, but Meybert shook his head; he didn’t see any reason to be optimistic.

“With no forewarning? That’s bizarre, Lieutenant.”

“Well, we’re outsiders…”

“But this is a garrison. It should be normal to get in touch.”

*Hmm.* After a little while thinking, his hand on his chin, he made his decision. If he didn’t understand the situation, he needed to proceed with maximum caution.

In other words, they had to prepare for war.

“Lieutenant Tospan, sorry, but mobilize the infantry as well. Have them get to their stations.”

“Right away, Captain Meybert.”

“Thanks. I’ll leave that up to you, then.”

A ready response. Objections and doubts swallowed, he knew that he needed to carry out his duty. Assured of this basic truth, Meybert was able to confidently fulfill his role.

Gathering up the noncommissioned officers who rushed into his office just as Tospan was leaving, he began handling the situation with the possibility of combat in mind.

“No word from HQ? Check again. Make sure to try the off-duty personnel as well. No, wait. We don’t have time. Let me see the document.”

“Here you go.”

“…So there really is nothing.”

He couldn’t see anything missing from the list of vessels. There was still a chance that this could be chalked up to a misplaced document or some failure to receive a message on the Kampfgruppe’s part, however remote.

That said, there were no combat veterans unaware of how important communication was. Degurechaff had pounded how critical it was to always report in during their time on the eastern front. Would the artillery unit that fought so hard at Soldim 528 screw up in this simpler situation?

Meybert’s feeling of foreboding worsened.

If there was no plan to receive these ships, it meant they were unknowns that they hadn’t been informed of. That alone was more than enough for

Meybert to want to order the troops to their stations.

*So why?*

"Why? Why isn't the alarm going off? How are our allies positioned?"

The questions slipped out quietly before he caught himself. Envisioning the worst-case scenario and groping for a way to prevent it was the most basic, fundamental rule of war.

When there's no reason to be optimistic, the only thing an optimistic superior officer manages to do is get his subordinates killed because of his laziness.

The fact that what should have been a given wasn't made him extremely uneasy. He soon found himself criticizing people.

"It seems the navy and other guards here don't have enough combat experience."

"I guess the routine of port defense made them inflexible."

Meybert shook his head in response to the noncommissioned officer's reply to his complaint. "It's the brass that's the problem. If they were properly scared of their superiors, no one would be slacking, even in the rear. Take Colonel Degurechaff; are there any heroes brave enough to be lazy under her watch?"

The polite smiles the NCOs shared as they chuckled were all the answer anyone needed. Even for veterans, that little girl—or rather, little commander—was a person to fear. She would never be the kind of boss who would be taken lightly or underestimated.

"She's blunt as hell, but she knows what she's doing. I'm not convinced these guys could say the same."

"Captain, that's a bit… Well, I don't disagree, but…"

"Right? To be perfectly honest…I miss the colonel shouting orders at us."

"You don't mind a candid comment, right, Captain? Because I'm pretty sure that's a mental disorder!"

"Ha-ha-ha." Once a riot of laughter had warmed up the atmosphere, it was time to exchange info.

Though they weren't used to actual battles, HQ was still HQ. Taking the receiver into his hand, Meybert dialed up command. If they weren't used to this situation, they were probably feeling confused.

*If necessary, I might need to send a runner or go over there myself to establish contact.*

But the captain's calculations were off from the start.

"This is port command."

They picked up on the first ring. *Oh?* The response was so prompt that Meybert was almost relieved. Between that and the steadiness of the voice, he didn't detect any sign of chaos.

"This is Captain Meybert of the Lergen Kampfgruppe. It's an emergency. Requesting the highest priority. Please connect me to the duty officer."

"A-an emergency? What's going on, Captain?"

*Maybe I was underestimating them. If I was passing judgment unfairly…* was what Meybert was thinking until he heard the signaler's confused tone of voice.

*Could it be…that they haven't noticed?*

"The duty officer! Now!"

"P-please wait a moment. I'll go check…"

"It's an emergency! Hurry up!"

Irritated, Meybert was forced to wait a few seconds. Or was it a few minutes?

Either way, it felt unbelievably long. The wait was incredibly nerve grating. *It's not as if communications with HQ are cut off or saturated, so what's with this holdup?!*

He couldn't believe it was taking so long to reach the duty officer.

"Captain Meybert, this is Lieutenant Colonel Paul. An emergency of highest priority? Sounds like you're really worked up. What's going on?"

"The unscheduled convoy approaching port."

"Oh, that? Probably just a communications lapse." Lieutenant Colonel Paul's comments were extremely lax. "We'll have them confirm their affiliation, but I'm guessing they're either the convoy that went to recover the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps or one of our transport convoys seeking safe harbor."

His tone said he had deemed there to be no issue and brimmed with unwavering confidence. It nearly made Meybert wonder if his panic was for nothing.

"You have confirmation?"

"Confirmation? We're working on it. I'm sure we'll have it soon."

It was hard to not blurt out, *You don't yet?!* This completely unfounded optimism sounded like a foreign language. If they weren't speaking over the

phone, Meybert would have been openly staring at the lieutenant colonel's face.

"Excuse me, Colonel, but they're already this close, and you're still confirming?"

"It's pretty common to have issues with the wireless. And you know what they say about the 'fog of war.' You're a frontline commander, so I would think you'd be used to it."

He would have liked to agree, but every capable subordinate has a duty to dissent. And more than anything, Meybert knew that it was his personal nature to do so when the time called for it.

"I've been given the code of the convoy recovering the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps! And we haven't received that signal from these ships!"

"I'm pretty sure I just said this, but…have you forgotten that there could be wireless issues?"

"With all due respect, Colonel Paul, the code includes signal flags. We've been monitoring with binoculars but haven't seen anything that could be an identification code."

There was only so much he could do to keep from raising his voice. He took a deep breath and cooled his head.

"Captain, a number of unidentified ships are on course for the port."

Nodding at the NCO's report, Meybert glanced out the window. They were definitely on approach. He had no doubt they would arrive soon. *Why don't these guys understand that every second counts in this situation?*

In full crisis mode, he pressed HQ. "…Command, have you gotten confirmation yet? We can't allow unidentified ships to come any closer. Requesting permission to fire warning shots."

"No."

Concise and firm.

The hand Meybert was using to hold the receiver tensed at Paul's response. *What a time for an idiotic conversation like this.*

"…I advise again. Please authorize warning shots and order the garrison to battle stations."

An unspoken *Don't you know anything?!* was implicit.

It wasn't even that much to ask for, but not saying anything would have conflicted with the principles of logic and reason. This was a trial that took

Meybert's mental strength to its limits.

"Please let me open fire."

"Captain Meybert! Why are you being so stubborn?! Wait until the ships have been ID'd! What would you do if you ended up firing on friendly ships?!"

He meant it to be his final confirmation, but the answer he received gave him nothing. *Damn it all to hell.* It was all very unfortunate.

"…I can see this conversation is going nowhere."

"What? Captain, what are you talking about?"

"You don't know if they're friend or foe?" *Who's being stubborn?! Shit, why can't you understand something so simple?* "For fuck's sake! That means they're foe. How clueless can you be?" Meybert told Command in the direct language of a soldier, his expression warping. There was no more time to waste.

*I'm done with words. Time to act.*

"Excuse me."

He slammed the receiver down and looked around at his people.

From the way they snapped their heels together with a silent *yes, sir*, he knew exactly what they were thinking. This was true understanding.

If the ships couldn't prove they were friends, it meant they couldn't complain if they were fired on. And if they couldn't answer attempts to hail them…it would be stranger *not* to shoot.

It was a principle so simple and clear that even the rawest recruit could understand.

To the captain, the situation they were in was utterly bizarre. *This truth is so self-evident. Why should I have to argue with HQ over it?*

The battlefield is a place filled with incomprehensible things. It always tests the limits of a person's imagination.

"Captain, are we deciding it's the enemy?"

"Yes." He replied to the formality of the NCO's inquiry concisely. "Treat them as enemies."

Even as he said it, it's not as if he didn't think, *What if I'm wrong…?* What if there were some circumstances, some discrepancy, and they really were friendly ships?

*…I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.*

"They couldn't prove they were friends. So they're the bad guys."

*If they're not allies, they're enemies.* It was there that Meybert struck his hand with a fist in realization. *There's no way our troops out there tearing it up on the southern continent wouldn't know such a basic rule!*

It would be way too idiotic to die in a barrage of friendly fire moments before returning home. If they actually were friendly troops, they would have tried everything they could think of to get in contact.

"…I just don't see that happening. In fact, we should interpret it as them trying to fool us."

*They really are the enemy. No need to hesitate, then.*

"Ready!" The orders came smoothly. "Aim!"

If there was a screeching of the gears, it was at that moment. Just as he was about to command them to fire, a shrill telephone ring filled the command post.

"Captain, it's headquarters."

He nodded at the NCO with a frown. "Give it here. Don't worry about us and keep aiming."

Taking the phone with an exasperated expression, the remote idea that it might be news that would make him feel better…didn't seem likely. He had given up on HQ's sense of urgency from the beginning.

He had intended to be prepared for the worst. But he was still ever so slightly optimistic.

That is, his worst-case scenario came with the reservation that *No matter how stupid they are, they couldn't be* that *stupid.*

Unconsciously, he envisioned the bare minimum standards he had come to expect and then braced himself for reality.

"Captain Meybert! What is the meaning of this! Hanging up like that! What are you trying to do?!"

Shouted complaints over the phone—during an emergency!

Still in disbelief, he found himself closing his eyes. *Dear Lord, is this a test?*

"…Though I realize it's presumptuous, I finally understand the colonel's thought process."

"You understand, Captain?"

"Yes, the thoughts of my direct superior."

"What?"

How infuriating it was to converse with this man who understood nothing.

Was this why Degurechaff was always hounded by a reputation for acting on her own discretion too often?

Talking to these idiots was a waste of all-too-precious time.

*What would she say at a time like this?* he thought for a moment, and it came to him.

*Yes, that's right. There's a line that's perfect for this situation.*

"I'm acting on my own discretion. If you'll excuse me…"

Meybert slammed the receiver down and shook his head. During his short career, there had been times he'd been required to make his own decisions.

But this was a first for him.

Saying *I'm acting on my own discretion* was Degurechaff's forte, not his, and yet…

"Of course a superior like her would be a bad influence."

"Is everything all right?"

"I just have an opinion or two." Meybert smirked at his subordinate. "As you advance, you'll grow to understand your superior's feelings—and hate it. It's most likely because you're starting to see things from different viewpoints."

Having to show stubborn determination in his voice in response to other people's opinions… Meybert found personally being in that position extremely frustrating.

"…Captain, may we fire?"

"Are you implying we should silence our guns in the face of the enemy? That's out of the question." He was about to gesture with his chin for them to go ahead when—*Oh*—he had a thought. He nearly forgot to add one last thing.

Orders had to be given properly.

"If anything goes wrong, I'll take responsibility."

It was a beginner's imitation of a superior officer, but he felt the need to say it clearly for his troops.

He was taking things into his own hands and getting his subordinates involved in the process. He believed what he was doing was necessary, but if he went this far and it did end up being a mistake, he'd be shit out of luck.

There was no one above him who would take responsibility, so he had to fulfill his duty as the highest-ranking officer.

"Any objections? If not, then begin." He glanced around the room, but

there were no protests. “Good.” He gave a small, satisfied nod. “Notice to all batteries. Aim as closely as possible but absolutely do not hit them.”

“Warning shots, sir?”

“I’d swear to God they’re the enemy, but military laws insist. Do your best not to hit them directly. Make it an intense warning volley, though. It’ll be a good chance to observe their reactions, too, so let’s just give ’em a scare.”

Then he took a breath. He felt uncomfortably nervous, different from how it felt giving orders to fire on the eastern front. But he had made his decision. It was time to act.

“Batteries, open fire!”

He had told them everything that needed to be said. For a precision war machine, his order was more than enough. Everything proceeded smoothly.

“Yes, sir! Begin firing!”

The Lergen Kampfgruppe—that is, the Salamander Kampfgruppe—had been thoroughly trained. These troops could be considered elite; whenever they executed an order, they shifted into a different mode. That is, any hesitation they may have had even moments before was burned up as fuel.

If their superior had judged the vessels to be enemies, then there was no rational reason for them to harbor any doubts. When promptly carrying out orders, hesitation would only get in the way, so it was completely discarded.

The job of these gunners baptized in a trial of iron on the eastern front was extremely simple and clear.

They were told to fire.

So they fired.

As quickly as possible and with unparalleled accuracy.

For these artillerists who had reached the epitome of gunnery, any further thought was utterly meaningless.

If there was anything that threatened to delay their movements, it was either speed or accuracy. But there was no rule that said they couldn’t be greedy.

Meybert demanded the dogged pursuit of both from his subordinates as a given. And his subordinates treated the demand as a given.

Thus, with a prayer that all would go as it should, artillery cannon fire echoed across the port.

A roar of steel.

The lingering vibrations that shook the air following the deafening sound —that's what gunners are truly after.

And they could be proud of their results.

Their dazzling skill with the coastal guns produced a near miss on the first shot.

A huge splash went up right next to the approaching ships. Too close to say they had missed but too far to say they had connected; the balance there was delicate.

It was practically perfect, considering they had fired immediately.

If they had been familiar with the guns' idiosyncrasies, the splash would have erupted a bit closer and really would've gotten the suspicious ships shaking.

"Calibration shot looks fine. Good, continue monitoring and prepare to fire for effe— Ah, wait, this is coastal artillery. Hold your fire. Just keep a close eye on the unidentified ships."

*They've done a great job.* Meybert was proud of his team as he picked up his binoculars.

*All that's left is to wait for the outcome. How will they react if they're enemies? No, on the off chance they're friendlies, will we get a furious telegram? Or an emergency general broadcast? Signal flags?*

The phone rang abruptly.

He looked up with a start and a doubt in his mind. It was too soon to be a reaction to the volley.

"Yes, this is Captain Meybert with the artillery."

"Captain Meybert! Do you have any idea what you're doing?! Stop this immediately! Can you hear me?!"

It was Lieutenant Colonel Paul screaming at the top of his lungs. He must have been awfully stressed. The aura of calm and confidence he had maintained up until a moment ago had vanished completely.

"Yes, Colonel. I can hear you clearly."

"Cease-fire right now! Stop it!"

There was a part of Meybert's mind that wondered. But there was also the reassuring whisper of reason telling him that he didn't have to obey baseless shouting.

"Sorry, but I can't do that."

"…What?" There was a brief pause after Paul's confused reply, and then

he flew into a rage. “Do you not realize what you’re doing?! Have you forgotten your duties and obligations, you imbecile?!”

“…I understand my job very well, Colonel.” There he smirked. “I very much doubt this is the case, but is it possible you’ve received a complaint from friendly forces? If so, I’ll cease-fire at once, but…”

“Answer me! Why are you firing without any confirmation?!”

“Ohhh, I see—so they didn’t call you.”

That was exactly why it was necessary to fire.

It was shockingly self-evident. It was as sure as the fact that the planets revolved around the sun.

*Why am I stuck arguing with HQ about something comparable to deciding whether the solar system is geocentric or heliocentric?*

*I’m only doing what must be done*, he was about to continue, when the reports of multiple cannons firing on the water captured his attention.

It wasn’t the sound of his own guns. Anyone in the artillery teams would know that much.

So there was only one other place it could be coming from. The enemy. It was an enemy attack.

“They’re shooting at us!”

The NCO’s shout steeled his resolve.

“Return fire. Open up with everything we have.” With the receiver in one hand, Meybert barked from his lower belly, “Fire, fire, fire like mad. You’re standing on land! Don’t you dare lose to a bunch of ships!”

Thankfully, they were in the ideal position as a coastal artillery battery firing on naval vessels.

On the eastern front, they would have had to deal with a shortage of shells and maintenance issues, but though this was also occupied territory, as a port near the home country with dependable infrastructure, it had a supremely ample stockpile.

His subordinates confirmed their orders, carried out their duty thoroughly even while under suspicion by their allies, and displayed the true value of their constant training.

The continued cannon reports were a wordless declaration that each gun had begun to return fire. Soldiers who know what to do without being told every step of the way are wonderful.

“The situation is as you’ve heard. I’m going to take command of the

defensive engagement. If you have any other defense-related orders, please get in touch."

He slammed the receiver down again and turned his field of vision to the sea, where he found the convoy attempting to enter the port speeding up and deploying a white smoke screen as it began to trade fire with them.

There was no way this was the reaction of a friendly unit that was accidentally fired on. Regardless of how it would go in a land battle, in this case charging instead of evading eliminated any chance of mistaken identity.

This was the enemy. The enemy was charging at them.

Which meant that what he needed to do was clear. Picking up the field telephone next to the one he had just hung up, Meybert called up the troops who were no doubt on standby.

"It's Meybert. You can hear me, right, Lieutenant Tospan?"

"Of course," came the affirmative. Thankfully, the telephone line hadn't been cut. "They've shown their true colors, huh?"

"Right, Lieutenant Tospan. This is what happens when our friends are too used to peace."

*Entirely too predictable*, thought Meybert with a slight smirk, looking toward the water with sober eyes. It was hard to imagine them succeeding—and simple to imagine a reason they would fail.

He didn't even have to look through his binoculars.

The other garrison troops had reacted far too late. From the way they finally got moving after their initial panic, all he could say was that they had discipline problems.

"We're moving awfully slow."

"Can't be helped."

"Are you sure? At this rate, they'll reach the dock and submarine pen."

"Your fears are well-founded, but we're not HQ. It's not our job."

"Shall we go on a field trip to observe?"

"While that sounds like fun, no. Thankfully, there's no lack of ammo. Let's just do what we can."

Being able to fire without a care is always something to be happy about. Compared to his days of keeping a close count of expended shells and watching the remaining balance uneasily as they fought the Federation Army day in and day out, this was much less stressful.

"What should the infantry do?"

“Stand by for rapid response. Let’s wait for HQ to do something. If there’s no further contact, I’ll give instructions.”

“Understood.”

Just as he clicked the receiver back into place, his subordinate’s warning filled the command post.

“It’s the enemy; one of the ships is rushing us!”

“Fire to interdict!”

But the moment he shouted it, he felt something was off.

Normally, a transport ship or an armed merchant cruiser would never charge right in front of coastal artillery. That was plain suicidal. So if these navy guys were doing it…

“It must be… Stop them! That ship is either going to self-destruct or it’s full of troops!”

His subordinates responded promptly to the sudden order and realigned their barrels. Though they fired quickly, several of the shots struck very close. And one of them was perfectly aimed.

“Nice! Direct hit on the enemy ship! That’s a show of skill. I see putting you through your paces on the eastern front was worthwhile.”

As an artilleryman, Meybert was wholeheartedly proud of his gunners.

But it seemed the heavy armor-piercing rounds had been a mistake. They appeared to have gone straight through the hull, causing surprisingly limited damage.

Before he could even click his tongue in annoyance, the enemy was moving. What should come out of the transport ship but a pack of what seemed like high-speed motorboats? Aggravatingly enough, emerging from behind them was what looked to be a destroyer and a light cruiser headed straight for the coast.

“Look at that—they’re definitely the same nationality.”

Meybert was already convinced, but with this degree of certainty, perhaps the hesitation the others felt would vanish. As he braced himself to see what would happen, the radio started screaming.

“HQ! HQ! Enemy attack! Mobilize the infantry!”

“R-return fire! Return fire!”

“Get the units to their battle stations! The artillery is already fighting!”

“Did they ever get identified?!”

“The duty officer said each unit should…”

“Secure the submarine pen! That’s what they’re aiming for!”

“Protect HQ!”

“Scramble the mages! Hurry!”

*Ahhh, damn it. Guess it’s total chaos.* Meybert nearly got discouraged but managed to just barely clear his thoughts with a firm shake of his head.

He needed the rest of the troops to compose themselves, and quickly; their numerical advantage wouldn’t work for them if they were in disarray. All he could do was hope it would happen as soon as possible. There wasn’t much he could do on his own.

All he had control over were the artillery in their fixed locations and a small detachment of infantry.

*How should I use them?*

*Probably the most efficient way would be to have them support the others.* Picking up the line connecting to Tospan, Meybert rapidly came up with a plan for fighting with their limited numbers.

“Lieutenant Tospan, are you hearing what I’m hearing over the wireless?”

“You mean the total chaos about the attack and whatnot?”

“Yeah. Exactly that. It’s a mess.”

The enemy was so bold; they had the imperial base right where they wanted it. Meybert was forced to admit they were losing the initiative even as they spoke.

“They may be the enemy, but what a bunch of crazy heroes. Not that there’s any reason we should let them have their way. We’ll send them all to the bottom of the sea.”

“Indeed. What should my unit do?”

“I want you to close with the enemy and engage. The garrison is taking their sweet time. If we don’t help them out, we’re very likely to end up on the back foot, fighting reactively.”

“If those are your orders. But taking just my company seems like a challenge, numerically speaking…”

“For better or worse, it’s probably not an issue. The enemies seem to consist of a commando unit.” He continued bluntly, “If our opponent is a small special ops unit, then setting aside quality for a moment, we won’t lose out on quantity. Any troops who aren’t our numbskull fellow soldiers getting toyed with over there should be able to overwhelm them.”

“Understood, Captain.”

It happened just as he was about to say, *Thanks, I'm counting on you*. One of the observation post personnel shouted a strained warning.

"Detecting mages!"

Meybert whirled around to ask, "From where? The sky?!"

"From the ship. Multiple signals detected inside!"

"So they're going to spit them at us here?"

The threat of aerial mages was one anyone from the Lergen Kampfgruppe understood all too well.

They were formed up alongside the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, elites capable of flexible operations. If Meybert hadn't witnessed their feats on the eastern front with his own eyes, they would have been difficult to believe.

Since he was familiar with those heavy hitters, he was intimately familiar with the destructive power of properly deployed mages. He knew that mages could bring more shock and awe to a battlefield than any amateur could imagine.

There were mages sent to support the enemy commando unit. There was no way they were amateurs.

"Lieutenant Tospan, there's an enemy mage unit. Multiple signals from within the ship."

"Marine mages?"

"Leave them to the garrison's mage unit. The scramblers are…okay—there they go!"

The rapid response mages got to work. The companies were evenly matched. Honestly, compared to the aerial mages he was used to seeing, they were awfully sluggish, but…as long as they could ignore the enemy marine mages, the artillery's job didn't change.

"It's so reassuring to have friendly mages in the air, huh, Lieutenant Tospan?"

"I agree. Even just a company or a platoon. There isn't some way to finagle some mage support, is there?"

"…You and I both had it too easy."

"Colonel Degurechaff really was a good boss. Damn!"

Tospan grumbled over the line.

Despite his complaints, there was little doubt he was already getting his infantry into position. As someone who had been baptized alongside him on the eastern front, he trusted the lieutenant on that point. Even while chatting

away, he could do a proper job.

Always make sure to do the minimum. That was eastern front–style.

And the eastern front had it all. It was short on everything, but the minimum was there and ready to go. Armored forces, artillery, infantry, mages—they all cooperated organically in combat.

For someone used to that harmonious Kampfgruppe setup, any battle where support was interrupted was to be avoided.

"Leave supporting fire to us. We'll lob some big shells at them."

Shouting to be heard over the gunfire and holding the receiver in one hand, Meybert poked an NCO.

"Hey, change the type of ammo in just one spot! Switch to high explosives!"

"Captain? For the ships, the armor-penetrating rounds are…"

Meybert shook his head in response to the lower-ranking officer's comment and answered him plainly. "We can't stop them all! So we'll drop some high explosives on the ones who make it through as a welcoming gift."

"…But the garrison has facilities nearby."

"Like I care!"

The NCO's blank look was unexpected. To Meybert, the outcome was self-evident.

"It's a bit late to worry about whether the facilities get a little damaged or not!"

It'll just mean a headache for the military administrators in charge of this stretch of occupied territory and the base itself. That was their job; the artillery's job was to fire the guns, so he figured fair was fair.

*I'll fill out as many pages of paperwork as you want after the fight.*

"…The enemies are going to crash!"

"So they mean to barge right in, huh? That thing's too sturdy to be a destroyer."

The cluster of incoming enemies didn't even slow down.

They were going so fast that Meybert could practically hear the deep, scraping noise they would make on their approach angle. The boats and pseudo-destroyer zoomed into the port and up, heaving their metal bellies onto the wharf. What happened next proceeded exactly as he had predicted.

Enemy infantry began to scatter, jumping nimbly down.

"So it *is* a commando unit!" Meybert spat in frustration.

Before his eyes, soldier after enemy soldier came ashore, though there weren't many of them. They were impressively quick, and their discipline spoke to a detailed plan and elaborate training.

The Communists boasted powerful momentum when they got going, but these units seemed to have a tenacity that would probably make even the Federation's soldiers shrink away.

"The tank desant on the eastern front was surprising, but the limeys are no slouches. I guess we can call that a destroyer desant?" Stunned, Meybert continued his monologue. "No, sailors call it boarding, I think. Is that what this is?"

But he had figured it was coming. When it came to position defense and having to do so as the result of a split-second decision, he had mastered the subject at Soldim 528. A commando unit with less matériel might than the Federation Army could probably be fried up one way or another by Tospan's infantry company.

"Captain!"

"I know!" Meybert winced and shook his head clear. "This is your invitation to the welcome party for the limeys! Get 'em!"

The moment he gave the order, the guns roared…followed by high explosives bursting right next to the enemy destroyer. It was as close to perfect as you could get without being perfect.

But it wasn't as effective as Meybert hoped. Frankly, they couldn't get a good angle. The walls of the port facilities were in the way. Regardless of how it would go if they were in an open field, in the port there were too many obstacles to catch many out in the open.

On top of that and worst of all, the friendlies and enemies were right up against each other; it was practically a melee. The timing of the shrapnel burst of the high explosive rounds could be unpredictable, so they hesitated to fire without thinking.

"Tch, how annoying. I guess our effectiveness is limited in this terrain."

He had wanted to contribute supporting fire, but it didn't seem like they could be of much help.

"…We can't ignore the enemy forces still out on the water. Maybe we should shoot them first." When he turned his binoculars toward the sea to try to get a handle on the situation, he emitted a confused grunt. "Ngh?!"

It was a strange sight. Smoke was rising from several enemy ships; it was

enough to make him want to rub his eyes. Had someone scored a direct hit? Which unit was it?

Ridiculously, he really did wonder for a moment, but then he noticed that although what they were emitting was smoke, it was a smoke *screen*.

*Ah, right, they were using it before, too. Sometimes they showed up on land, but I guess ships use them, too. Seems like they've got a trick or two up their sleeves.*

"Well, shit. Our coastal guns can't do much against smoke screens."

The targets weren't packed close enough together for an area barrage to be truly effective, and it was impossible to land a direct hit with artillery with nothing but dim shadows in the distance to go off.

"I guess we have to prioritize eliminating the commandos for now. As long as the garrison troops pull their weight…"

*How's it going over there?* Meybert checked in on the radio. At that instant, a hopeless frown clearly appeared on his face.

"Reinforcements! For the commandos?! What are our guys doing?!"

"Help! It's the enemy! The enemy is—!"

"Stop! Stop firing! You'll hit our guys!"

"They're shooting at us! They're the enemy!"

"There's a fire! Quick, put it out!"

"Prioritize eliminating the enemy!"

Impenetrable chaos. Or perhaps this was the kind of chaos that directly preceded a rout. Everyone was just screaming whatever came to mind first. Every voice on the channel spoke to the far from orderly situation.

Just as he was wondering what to do, the line connecting him directly to Tospan gave a shrill ring. *Good timing.*

"Lieutenant Tospan, they're penetrating the defenses. At this rate—"

"Captain! It's no good! We won't make it in time!"

"What?! Why not?" His brow was about to furrow—*How could you not make it in time?*—but he found himself flabbergasted instead.

"We're being fired on! By a friendly position!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!"

Of *course* it would happen now. Or could it *only* happen now? These troops with little to no combat experience were truly panicking.

At this point they were probably terrified of anything that moved and just assumed every shadow was an enemy. And he couldn't expect the officers or

NCOs to gain control of the situation if they lacked experience as well.

So not only was there mass confusion but he wasn't even sure he would be able to get in contact with anyone.

When they tried to fire at the enemy, they were held back; when they tried to stop the enemy, they were shot at. This sort of thing didn't even enter the imagination on the eastern front.

"Life is just full of surprises."

All he could do was grumble. *These damned scarecrows have no idea what they're supposed to be doing!*

*What exactly do they think war is? There should be an addendum to the rules. Yes, apparently, the manual needs to stipulate that war be taken seriously.*

"Lieutenant, concentrate on quieting the friendly position for now. You can't reach them?"

If it were an enemy position, they could deliver smoke or armor-piercing rounds according to their fancy, but their own people were down there. They couldn't shoot to suppress just the enemy.

*These idiots!*

"We're trying, but semaphores aren't working, and neither are signal lights. They're just— Ahhh, shit!"

"What happened?"

"Enemy reinforcements! More newcomers on the wharf! They're still coming ashore!"

Tospan screamed that more were arriving. It would be impossible to pin the enemy commandos at their beachhead at this rate.

The imperial side was in chaos. Meanwhile, the enemy was in great form. No one wants to fight against infantry who can make calls at the squad level to carry out their mission without officers urging them on.

"But we have an absolute numerical advantage. Calm down, Lieutenant Tospan!"

"…Sorry, sir."

As long as the attacking side couldn't overwhelm the defending side with numbers, the imperial side would have the advantage. Given enough time, the situation would turn in their favor.

Even the enemy had to be aware of that.

"There are just a few of them, right?"

“Even with the reinforcements, they have, at best, a battalion. It’s not that many bodies.”

Receiving Tospan’s report, Meybert nodded on the other end of the line. “They’re probably a strike team tasked with carrying out some sabotage. They have no intention of taking and holding ground… Sheesh, even just a platoon would be…hmm?”

Meybert found himself at a loss for words and had his brain do a bit of thinking.

Even if their objective was sabotage, they were on a raid. If they attacked the position and failed, they would withdraw. That was how it went on the eastern front.

But this was the sea. In that case, their escape route would be the boats.

*Instead of attempting to figure out a way to capture the ships along the wharf, wouldn’t it be better to simply destroy them? It’s not as if our enemies are the kind of idiots who would leave the key to their code on a boat anyway.*

But that was a major gamble.

*It takes guts to charge in here with infantry alone. They must be awfully confident about their plan, including whatever extraction they have; otherwise it would just be reckless.*

“Are they hiding something? Or maybe… Oh no!” The sudden realization caused him to shout. “Lieutenant Tospan! Turn back right now!”

“What? We don’t need to intercept?”

He responded a moment too late.

Impatient even to take the moment required to explain, Meybert screamed, “There’s no guarantee they’re only infantry!”

What a horrible mistake. He had forgotten the possibility of mages. There was no reason the ones flying up over the water were the only mages they had!

When he remembered Soldim 528, it was so obvious!

*Use a portion of the mages as bait to catch the enemy’s attention. Make them think that’s all the mages you have, drawing their wariness in a different direction, and then slam the off-guard fools from the flank when the time is just right.*

The very technique that had done so well for them!

“Remember the eastern front! Check that commando group! The colonel would have definitely—!”

Before he could say *mixed mages into it*, he was interrupted by a report.

"We've got mages! Mana signals detected among the enemy commandos!"

Hearing the NCO's warning, Meybert clicked his tongue. Tospan seemed to have grasped the situation at the same time and was emitting a pained groan.

Well, that made sense. His company was most familiar with the kind of threat a composite group of mages and infantry could pose.

"Shit! They really got us!"

"Lieutenant, can you help maintain the defense effort with infantry alone?"

"…It'll be tough but not impossible. Oh"—he added some extra details—"if it's just defending the position, we'll figure something out. It'll be a stopgap solution, but we'll get it done. We'll reset the defensive line now, so hold on."

To put it plainly, this straitlaced guy was bizarrely well served by being familiar with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff called him "an inflexible person who only learns from experience." In other words, Tospan stubbornly trusted in his experience without a trace of doubt or hesitation.

After all, he had seen it on the eastern front.

He had witnessed that crafty aerial mage move, as well as how lethal the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion was. So it was easy for him to arrive at the conclusion that mages were capable of that much.

Of course, it depended on the situation.

But having that idea of how things went was a plus when their opponents were elite Commonwealth marine mages. After all, he'd fought against the Federation orbs.

Position defense against those unbelievably solid defensive shells—surely there could be no better lesson in how to stop mages.

Though the Commonwealth marine mages were nimble, with these conditions and the current balance of power, they could be defeated. Experience is a fountain of courage. Plus, with plenty of ammunition, a position, and pinpoint support from artillery, there was no reason they should be overrun.

Even if the rest of the garrison wasn't much more use than a bunch of

scarecrows, as long as the Kampfgruppe he belonged to functioned like it was supposed to, then they would be able to achieve the bare minimum of self-defense. Whether it was delivering a danger-close fire mission with artillery batteries that didn't give a damn about appearances or dealing out concentrated antitank fire to deal with hardened mages, the Salamander Kampfgruppe's technical skills were unmatched.

It was a battle of elites versus elites.

Of course, ultimately it was only the infantry and artillery keeping the Kampfgruppe running while the others were away. Considering that his usual aerial mage support and the armored forces threatening a flanking attack were missing from the lineup, Meybert was actually going into this battle with a handicap.

But time was on the Imperial Army's side—something that rarely ever happened. Even if they got pushed, as long as they didn't break, the enemy would leave of their own accord sooner or later. There was really no reason to panic.

A huge explosion and a shock that shook even the command post. It was definitely a secondary explosion. There is no shortage of flammables at a military port.

*These bastards.* He shook his head and stood to try to get a handle on the situation, and that was when he caught the NCO's shout.

"They got the submarine bunker!"

When he looked in that direction, he couldn't miss the huge pillar of rising black smoke. The way it was billowing up made it eloquently clear that the bunker had been blown away.

The scene made Meybert snap in spite of himself. "Those morons! A structure like that should be easy to defend, and they couldn't even manage that?!"

*Even the new recruits quaking in the trenches—nothing more than temporary fieldworks—and constantly harassed by Federation Army heavy artillery can hold the line! How can you not even protect a bunker that is basically a hunk of concrete against lightly equipped infantry and a few mages?!*

*What is the garrison even* for*?!*

After venting, he shook his head and realized the signaler was shouting. "What is it?"

“HQ is ordering us to help the bunker!”

Even when he asked, “What?” his subordinate merely repeated that they were to rescue the bunker.

“These idiots.”

“Huh?”

“They’re aiming so badly that Lieutenant Tospan and his unit are under friendly fire, and now the bunker’s been blown up. There are even enemy mages acting like they own the place, so how are we supposed to do anything?”

Orders are absolute, but they can’t mobilize reality. Even a great king can’t stop the sea. There’s a well-known tale about that.

“Give me the phone.”

“Captain?”

“Just give it here. Hurry up.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Snatching the receiver, Meybert took one huge breath.

“Command, this is Captain Meybert. Can you hear me?”

“We finally connected? Captain, as you can see, the submarine bunker has been hit. Send assistance immediately!” It was none other than Paul’s distressed voice on the line.

“We don’t have enough people. But if HQ insists, then we’ll have to do something. Would you like the artillery to blow up friend and foe alike?”

“What?”

Meybert repeated slowly for the uncomprehending lieutenant colonel. “Please give us orders to fire on the ruins of the bunker. I’m confident that we can blow up everyone there, friend and foe alike.”

“Is this more of your bullshit?”

“I believe that’s the only useful thing we’re capable of at the moment, sir. If you’d like us to fire, just give us a call. I’ll be going for now.”

Meybert slammed the receiver down, heaving another massive sigh. He knew he would have to brace himself, but this was something else.

He figured it was best that they prepare.

“Ordering all units, including the artillery batteries, to make ready for close-quarters combat. Assume the worst case. Brace yourselves in case they charge in here. Hurry up and check your equipment while there’s still time. Remember how it went at Soldim 528.”

*Time is on our side? Really?*
*At this rate, we're doomed.*

## THE SAME DAY, THE ROYAL CAPITAL OF ILDOA, GOODWILL TOUR GROUP

Metaphorically rocking aboard the incredibly smooth train ride, we soon arrive in the Ildoan capital. The extravagance of the city's central station is proof that it has been renovated to impart a powerful first impression of the country as a whole.

As one might expect from the capital, it neither pales nor outshines the Empire's in terms of scale. In a simple comparison, the Empire's Berun probably has the slightest edge when it comes to distribution capability. Given the forced mobilization of matériel during the war, I'm not sure whether "the slightest edge" can be considered a win or not.

Going a step further, the only real claim to victory we can make is volume. We have no choice but to shut our eyes to the other crucial elements of aesthetics and ambiance.

After all, Berun has been shrouded in the veil of total war for ages now. The oppressive atmosphere seeps out from the very bones of the city, making even the air feel gloomy.

Compared to Ildoa, where the people can naively sing the praises of peacetime prosperity, the contrast is all too recognizable. I can only think the abnormal atmosphere in the imperial capital is different down to the oxygen entering your lungs.

"…It's so cheerful even at the station," Tanya murmurs to Colonel Calandro.

"What?"

"There aren't any bereaved families grieving at the station. It's a fine thing."

Tanya's somewhat sarcastic grumble is met with a slight shrug from Calandro. As far as I can tell, he understood the implication but has chosen to let it pass without comment. Another privilege of a country not participating

in the war.

"We've arrived in the Ildoan capital. Allow me to welcome you again, Colonel Degurechaff. Rest easy, my friend from our allied nation, I'm going to give you a proper reception."

"It's an honor."

Though it's all formality, courtesy should be answered with courtesy.

Even in the army, you can't escape society and the etiquette that goes hand in hand with it. The second is especially important in the peaceful Kingdom of Ildoa.

I'm jealous of how much surplus energy they have to devote to manners and custom. Is being escorted from the train by a pseudo–honor guard that guides them politely to the station building just another part of that formality?

The military police acting as honor guards seem less concerned with etiquette than with keeping them isolated from their surroundings.

*Aha.* Tanya smiles to herself. Apparently Ildoa doesn't want imperial soldiers walking freely in such a public place.

Surely that's the only explanation of their necessary friendship. Tanya even expects, after they are politely guided to the building, when she is told they're having a meeting between point people, to have some impossible problem shoved off on her.

I'm sure stupid national honor and diplomatic interests will cause me to suffer in the field as usual.

But on this point, Ildoans, for better or worse and by virtue of being a "neutral country," have much more experience being considerate than people in the Empire.

Waiting for her in the room Calandro leads her to is a single military bureaucrat wearing the insignia of a major.

As Tanya watches, wondering what Ildoa could possibly want, the major hands over an envelope, exchanges a few brief words with Calandro, and promptly takes their leave. The colonel and Tanya are the only ones who remain in the room.

And Calandro hands over the envelope without opening it.

"This is for you."

"Thank you. But what is it?" I ask the question after accepting the envelope. A bundle of papers?

"Your visas and a bit of identification. Also a blank check from the Ildoan

General Staff. With regards from General Gassman, who will be covering the sum with classified funding." At this point, he chuckles a bit. "Of course, a check with no upper limit at all wouldn't do, so it's really just a small amount, but… Well, it's from the Ildoan Army. It will be accepted anywhere in Ildoan territory. I'm sure you won't have any trouble getting anyone to accept it."

"Allow me to take a look."

When she opens the envelope—*Aha!*—there's a neatly written check stamped with the Ildoan Army's seal. It's the type of thing you would never see on the battlefield.

It's also physical evidence eloquently proving that Calandro managed to seize entertainment funds from Gassman.

There's no way Tanya could be this generous. Even if she haggled with Colonel Lergen and Lieutenant Colonel Uger, the best she would be able to come up with is maybe a few extra potatoes or bullets.

Damn it. We'd look pathetic!

"An offering from your allies wishing you a comfortable trip. We couldn't let you be limited by travel expenses." Calandro smiles perkily.

"My deepest gratitude for your kindness. I think the select company from my Kampfgruppe are quite big eaters and drinkers. That won't be an issue, will it?"

Tanya's remark implies that they may charge it to the limit, but Calandro's expression doesn't falter in the slightest.

In other words, there's no danger of them coming up short or feeling anxious about the amount.

A juicy budget. What an enviable situation! I'm slightly worried my jealousy will turn me into a monster.

"No, don't hold back; eat and drink all Ildoa has to offer. The high-octane gasoline is for the airplanes, though, so as long as you aren't guzzling that, there's no problem at all."

"Huh? G-gasoline?"

"I'm surprised, Colonel. You didn't get the details from Colonel Lergen?"

I try to gloss over it with a comical face, but this was probably a real blunder. Does Ildoa and the Empire have some sort of secret agreement about high-octane gasoline?

"I've heard Ildoa is strictly neutral. And actually, it's because we were

unable to rely on your ‘kindness’ when attempting to retrieve the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps that I’m here now.”

“No hard feelings, please, Colonel. I understand why you want to say things like that, but we’re a neutral country. There’s a limit to what we can do.”

Calandro, frowning as he delivers his rejoinder, is an Ildoan soldier to the last, defending his country. And it’s true that it’s difficult, legally, for a neutral country to allow passage for soldiers of a belligerent state.

I would like to honor the law. I can even understand why the Ildoans resort to a fair-weather plan that prioritizes their own interests. But when that indecisive foreign policy directly causes me suffering, it’s a different story. So yes, Tanya will deign to be unpleasant for at least a moment.

“A limit? I think there’s also a limit to alliances between nations.”

“Indeed there is.”

“Huh?”

“…In any case, Ildoa is your country’s ally. You could even call us your dear allies if you like.”

Tanya stares at him, but he continues shaking his head.

“Strict neutrality during a war is ultimately just a diplomatic idiom.”

“Colonel, up to this very moment…I was under the impression that Ildoa was respecting the restrictions of neutrality fair and square.”

“Ha.” Calandro promptly denies it. “We’re not so heartless that we’d abandon our friends. We’re doing everything we can—as my slip of the tongue indicated just a moment ago.”

“About the high-octane gasoline or whatnot for airplanes?”

“Yes… We’re lending you a hand in the western air war with aviation fuel and so on.”

“Are you saying a drop of oil is worth a drop of blood?”

Ages ago, that phrase was chanted in a country in the Far East. Though rather than use it as a wartime slogan to enlighten the people, it should definitely have been debated as a general strategy.

Finding that unexpected juxtaposition humorous, Tanya laughs. It’s a very similar phrase, although the usage is entirely different. Calandro is claiming that they’ve fulfilled their duty as an ally by providing support from the rear. Isn’t that rich?

“Colonel, with all due respect…is it even possible to be an ally without

shedding some blood?"

Sure, why not? I personally think it's perfectly acceptable. But this weathercock attitude makes for a dishonest business associate.

Going a step further, I'd like to shake him up with a bit of recon-in-force to gauge his reactions.

"Instead of shedding blood with us and lining up our dead side by side, you shed oil! Is that what you consider the act of a sincere ally in Ildoa?"

"In the sense of supporting your country's war effort, we certainly do. I suppose I shouldn't talk about such things with my limited perspective."

No reaction. Or rather, he stands on awfully solid ideological footing. In the end, Calandro makes for a fine cog in an evil organization.

…I suppose I should lay down my sword. Any more than this would just be a waste of time.

"You'll have to excuse me, as I'm neither a diplomat nor a politician. I'm a mere field officer who has nothing to do with high-level strategy."

"You're saying a little girl who was awarded the Silver Wings Assault Badge is a mere lieutenant colonel?" Nodding at his own words, Calandro continues with an air of disbelief. "Could a mad dog with no knowledge of strategy become a staff officer at such a tender age?!" With an amused grin on his face, he claps his hands. "And on top of that, you were one of the Twelve Knights at war college. You don't know strategy? Please, no need for the false humility. I read your graduation thesis—you were born for strategy."

He's smiling, all except for the eyes fixed on Tanya. That steady stare has the air of a lucid observer.

"This is a great opportunity, Lieutenant. We should get to know each other better."

He wants Tanya to stop acting like a frontline commander and simply speak her mind. Even though he must be deceiving her about his true nature, too.

"Colonel Calandro, I didn't realize you knew so much about the Empire's military."

Nodding in admiration, I don't let the chance to retort slip by. "When we met on the eastern front, I heard you were an alpine expert, but…you really are well-informed." The implication that he's no mere field officer is very plain. "Such good ears you have."

“Of course. We’re allies, aren’t we?” Calandro replies calmly, as tough to ruffle as expected.

So just any allied officer knows the Empire’s process for cultivating staff officers and has read war college theses that are practically military secrets?!

He’s an intelligence agent or, at the very least, a bureaucrat at the center of the army involved in drafting foreign policy.

In other words, he’s a very shady guy. And probably also the very embodiment of dedication to geopolitical expediency. No wonder the General Staff assigned him to the Lergen Kampfgruppe when he visited as a military observer.

“Should I thank you for your interest in the Empire?”

“Offering the gratitude of a mere field officer?”

“Considering our working relationship as a colonel with roots in the alpine troops and me, a mere field officer, it doesn’t seem inappropriate…”

They exchange glances in silence.

On one side is Tanya, questioning Ildoa’s lack of candidness. On the other is Calandro, requesting that she consider their respective circumstances.

Both are bound by their public personas, and they can’t even have a conversation without embellishing a word here or there.

This truly embodies the beautifully paradoxical relationship that Ildoa and the Empire share. A wonderful friendship. It’s much more civilized than pointing guns at each other and waiting for the first chance to shoot. You could even call it eminently peaceful.

“…Well, then. I guess I have the disadvantage when it comes to sounding each other out.”

Calandro raises his hands in mock surrender. If he were really capitulating, things wouldn’t go like this. His casual demeanor paradoxically requires a great deal of composure. And in reality…he probably isn’t ruffled at all.

This is Ildoa. His home turf. As a foreigner, Tanya has nothing to gain here by making a scene.

“Colonel, I’m happy to take advantage of your kindness.” Smiling, polite, and friendly—even if only on the surface. Tanya opens up a bit. After all, has this not been a heartwarming conversation? “I’m not great at sounding people out, either. Perhaps my feelings gushed out, given that I’m a frontline soldier. If I’ve said anything that is liable to be misinterpreted in an inappropriate

way, please forgive me."

"…Colonel, you could definitely be a diplomat. How about it? You could quit being a soldier and switch careers."

"You think I'm cut out to be one?"

Tanya's question contains a glimmer of hope, but Calandro winces.

"I don't mean it as an insult. I know that your specialty is military affairs. Perhaps my joking went too far, but I truly do respect you as a colleague. So"—he smiles bitterly—"please enjoy this little trip. I do mean that."

"Are you sure? I was convinced that from the average Ildoan's perspective, we're a bunch of unwelcome guests."

He responds to her question with a vague expression. A vague expression resembling his wince of a moment ago. He must want to say that he can't state outright how put out they are. Regardless of how Ildoa feels, he must be conveying his personal goodwill by swallowing that comment.

Calandro is a tricky one. Someone serving their leader is always coming from a mix of private- and public-facing perspectives; it's hard to tell what's genuine and what's fabricated.

"A neutral state is enemy to no one. Conversely, we have no reason to deny imperial soldiers on leave a sightseeing visit."

"And your warm reception of the submarine crew goodwill docking in your harbor is an extension of that?"

"Of course. We've long been proponents of the good neighbor policy. You can't have too many friends."

Under the circumstances, he continues responding to everything with a good-natured expression. That must be his own personal policy. Ildoa is an opportunistic bat flitting from side to side, but that also means it's a rational weather vane nation.

We can't trust them, but we can have faith in their abilities and judgment. And I suppose we can trust Calandro as a contact.

With those feelings on her mind, she gratefully accepts the envelope containing the promised check and visas.

"All right, Colonel. We'll enjoy the trip you have planned for us. And I'm sure the dinner will go well."

## JULY 21, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, ILDOAN TERRITORY, INTERNATIONAL TRAIN FIRST-CLASS CABIN

The peaceful hours flew by. The stay in Ildoa was marked by much carousing. The few days spent in the capital were over in the blink of an eye. It was only natural that some of my subordinates wanted to stay longer. Personally, I would have been happy to remain partying in Ildoa till the end of the war.

Sadly, their host made it perfectly clear that a long stay was not an option. With their thorough and ongoing weather vane diplomacy, the presence of imperial troops was a serious liability.

On leave, mingling with the locals, sightseeing—the excuse didn't matter. Having imperial soldiers wandering around where diplomats from countries at war with the Empire could see them was simply too much of an inconvenience.

The eagerness to get rid of the imperials as quickly as possible lurked beneath their smiles, even as they prepared a courtesy red carpet.

It essentially was, *We've kindly arranged you a train home, so get out.*

We were practically handed the tickets by force. Was it a minimal show of goodwill or the Empire asserting its presence? The entire staff of the imperial embassy came to see us off…but they were in the enviable position of getting to remain in Ildoa. Even though I privately was jealous, I couldn't very well let it show on my face as a fully fledged member of society. At the very least, I had to force a smile when it came time to say good-bye before boarding the train.

And now I'm back in a compartment on this weirdly smooth-running train. It's nauseatingly well-appointed. And the Ildoans are so good at hospitality that they managed to learn our tastes during our stay.

Thanks to which, we have the unbelievable pleasure of choosing our breakfast according to our preferences. That's how Tanya is able to enjoy nibbling on the light morning meal of her choice alongside her adjutant.

Fresh fruit, simple cold dishes, plus proper bread and meat. Honestly, what luxury.

"…Conspicuous consumption. And a plush passenger train home. But why do the servers come directly to our room…? They don't want us talking

in the dining car?"

"Well, it is an international train. We're probably not the only ones on board."

"So we're not quite quarantined, but I guess they have their own concerns to consider. Well, even so, it's great to have tasty ham and cheese, eh, Lieutenant?"

The white bread makes me happy, too, but ham and cheese provide the quality protein we so often lack.

"Colonel, have some coffee, too."

"Ohhh, thanks. I appreciate it, Lieutenant Serebryakov."

The fragrance of the black liquid she pours… There's no mistaking it.

"…It really is nice to get the genuine article."

"I haven't smelled this in a while."

Two cups. A duet of singing aromas.

Good coffee brewed from proper beans served in proper porcelain, which has gotten progressively harder and harder to find. *This* is true civilization.

"I take it you didn't get a chance to stock up?"

"No, I did a little. It was on Ildoa's tab, after all."

My adjutant laughs that she didn't hold back—how very shrewd of her. I'm sure the stack of invoices that ran right up to the limit are hitting Colonel Calandro's desk right about now.

Should we extend a word of gratitude to Ildoa's apparently famous military administrator, General Igor Gassman? That said, it's another country's confidential funds. If Tanya wasn't personally involved, we probably never would've even heard about it at all.

"I only wish our General Staff were as generous," Tanya comments casually with a wince. "Though a look at the General Staff dining room is enough to know that dream isn't coming true."

Awful food served on splendid dishes.

No matter how nice the plates are, if you have no choice what you can use to fill them, it's all for naught. The Empire has a tendency to focus on form and forget function.

"It's wonderful to have such a colorful meal."

"Yes, Ildoa is really—how to say? Full of color."

Picking at the gorgeous spread of hors d'oeuvres laid out on the compartment's table along with Serebryakov, Tanya smiles faintly. "You can

tell from just a single meal."

"It really is beautiful."

"Truly, which is why it's so painful." The words are out before she realizes.

"Is something wrong? Do you feel sick?"

In response to her adjutant's worried look, Tanya winces in self-deprecation. "No, just being silly. Perhaps I've been poisoned, too."

"Colonel?"

It's an unusual comment. At least, it's going a bit further than a patriotic soldier like I normally would. But I've also realized something.

Maybe it's the coffee making my tongue loose.

"No, I just mean…Ildoa is too calm. I can't relax."

"…I see."

"Yes…"

*This is no good.* In order to clear the strangely heavy atmosphere, I try to change topics.

"By the way, Lieutenant, do you prefer red or white wine?"

"Huh? Wine, ma'am?"

Tanya nods at her blank-faced adjutant.

During her stay in Ildoa, she nailed down some gift bottles to use as ammo—all on Ildoa's dime, of course. Between the bottles she acquired for giving others upon their return and the gifts she received from Calandro, Tanya has a nice little collection going.

Sadly, though the wine is quality stuff…and since Tanya can't have any, they don't serve much purpose besides as ammo for social situations. Of course, I'm happy to stock up on whatever type of ammo I can get her hands on.

"Bottles I received in Ildoa. Why don't you go open some up with Weiss and the crew?"

"Are you sure?!"

"No matter how lucky I was to get them, I can't drink. I don't mind if you guys enjoy them."

I rummage in my bags to pull out the bottles and tell Serebryakov she can take whatever she wants.

"Thank you, Colonel!"

"Make sure to tell Major Weiss I'm grateful for his support."

“Will do! I’ll be going, then!”

My adjutant looks truly happy as she trots off. Judging from her contented expression, she must be completely relaxed.

She’s one excellent adjutant.

“We’ve been together for a while, but…”

I really have no idea what motivates her in most cases.

Is it just the multifaceted nature of humans? Perhaps it was a mistake to neglect sociology and socialization. If I get the chance, maybe I should study some for future reference.

“School, huh?”

This trip to Ildoa has been my first time in the rear in a while. A sleepy peace hanging in the air. Culture, civilization, and a true peace I had nearly forgotten.

On the flip side, the Empire is still very much at war.

In preparation for total war, every last resource is being driven into a trial of fire and steel before being reduced to ashes. The peaceful rear? No matter how far in the rear it is, the imperial capital is still the capital of the Empire—that is, the capital of a state at war. Why *wouldn’t* the atmosphere be grim?

“Haaah.” A sigh escapes naturally.

“…The paradigms are just too different.”

A grumble from the heart.

“The front lines, the rear, a peaceful mediator. I realize they’re all different. But living in the same world, can we converse despite the different paradigms?”

When was it that the importance of deconstruction began to be pointed out in earnest for the first time? We need to consider whether our ways of thinking are being needlessly restricted by the language we use.

I, Tanya von Degurechaff, wish for peace. The Imperial Army General Staff and Supreme Command probably also wish for peace. Ildoa, the client states of the Empire, and the peoples of the world surely wish for peace in equal measure. With the exception of a minority of psychopaths or people morbidly devoted to preserving warrior culture, I doubt anyone is out there raving about how great making war is. Peace is unconditionally valuable. Even the most unjust peace is surely preferable to the most just war.

At least for someone forced to serve in the military.

A massive waste of resources is always folly.

Tanya is a rock when it comes to her staunch anti-Commie stance, but even she won't unconditionally support a war against them.

If Commies can be cleaned up using some peaceful method that doesn't involve open warfare, then I fully believe that the more civilized method is preferable.

War in general just has an abysmal cost-performance ratio.

As long as we're not in the ideal situation of being able to wipe out the Commies with strategic nukes in a one-sided salvo because we have them and they don't, then going on the offensive is out of the question. Thinking things like this makes my coffee taste bitter. This isn't a very good way to enjoy coffee.

What a waste. I decide to change gears.

Looking over the foreign newspapers I acquired in Ildoa, it's fun to compare how each country's censors work. The Federation and Commonwealth papers are especially fun. It cracks me up to see that they aren't any better than the Empire's.

The only downside is that it makes me feel like I'm going to lose my mind.

Still, that's where the three meals Ildoa has prepared come in. Lunch is some nice meat, and dinner is a well-made stew.

Tanya even gets to enjoy dinner in the empty dining car with her unit. Well, it is annoying that Weiss comes to wheedle for another bottle of wine…but I can overlook it if it means my war-nut battalion can learn to appreciate some of the finer attractions of civilization. Still, it strikes me that my vice commander's alcohol habit is worse than I first thought.

After that pleasant meal, since a bed—and quite a nice one for a sleeping car—has been prepared, all that's left is to jump into it.

Then, after laying down comfortably and falling into a tranquil sleep, Tanya is awoken by a slight swaying.

The vibrations had been much quieter before I went to sleep. The sounds and swaying have increased so much that for a moment, I wonder what's going on.

For a split second, alarm bells go off in my head. But then I realize, this uncomfortable swaying is actually just the familiar tracks that crisscross the Empire.

"So you can tell when you've passed the border just by how well the rails

are maintained…”

Ildoa was a quiet, colorful, foreign world of abundance.

The Empire is gray. It has wrung out as much geopolitical power as it can, but it’s already beginning to fray in subtle ways that are nonetheless impossible to ignore.

“It really forces you to take a hard look at poverty.”

One of the great powers. This country with the momentum of the rising sun billed itself as the crown of the world.

And now look at it.

By the time Tanya comes of age, everything will be backward. The Empire poured all its energy into the army and is now self-destructing because it can’t even maintain it.

It aggravates me that I can totally see us losing the war.

“I hate this so much.”

I especially dislike the fact that evacuation seems like it will become necessary at some point in the near future.

“…I guess I’ll go back to sleep.”

The road to the capital is still long.

Better sleep while I have the chance.

It should blow my stress away, too.

[chapter]

# VI

## At Dusk

**If all love is blind, then loving your country should be no exception.**

Colonel Calandro of the Ildoan Army

# [chapter] VI At Dusk

**JULY 22, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE**

Back from a business trip or a chance to pop into headquarters. Either way, an adult member of society can't neglect to always appeal to others when the chance presents itself.

Reporting into the General Staff Office is a great opportunity.

Turn in the report on the V-2 operation in the south and miscellaneous observations of Ildoa. Establish that my adjutant will hand over the souvenir wine to the recipients.

Then all that's left is to the make the rounds.

Tanya is summoned by an extremely sober-faced Colonel Lergen just as she's oozing maximum charm. There is almost no time between his "Can I see you for a moment?" and her being marched off to his office.

Well, he's certainly in a rush. It's natural to wonder why. But when he shares his news, all extraneous thoughts go out the window.

"Colonel Lergen, excuse me—what did you just say?"

"You heard correctly, Colonel."

I'm dumbfounded, and Colonel Lergen simply continues matter-of-factly, looking tired as he does.

"Captain Meybert and Lieutenant Tospan were taken in by military police. Of course, it's only temporary. I'm sure they'll be released right away."

"I beg your pardon, sir. This isn't an issue of timing. You're telling me my artilleryman and infantry idiot were arrested?!"

Manual maniacs. They're the type to follow the rules to the letter. The type who will work steadily at whatever they're told to do diligently and

without rest. I know both of their personalities intimately.

They are in no way the sort of useless imbeciles who would neglect the manual and make it up as they go along or do anything so stupid as acting on their own bumbling authority. Tospan may be the type of numbskull who doesn't question the rules, but that means at least he has read them.

"Both of them are even bigger sticklers for the rules than I am. I can't think of any reason they would be taken in. What was the reason the MPs gave?"

"…The occupied port they were posted at came under attack by Commonwealth commandos. Our troops managed to repel them, but the damage is severe. The commanders at the base are furious and are claiming the Lergen Kampfgruppe's laziness led to excessive damage."

"I'm sorry, laziness? Too eager to fight, I could understand, but lazy? Not those guys."

As far as Tanya knows, both of them are the type to diligently devote themselves to their work. They simply aren't the sort of idiots who would get arrested for neglecting their duties.

"Lieutenant Tospan is the kind of guy who is thrilled to be ordered to defend the line with his life! The only time he'll slack off in the face of the enemy is when he's dead!"

Though he looks a bit fed up, Lergen responds to Tanya's sputtering with a nod. "What you say makes sense. From what I've heard, the navy fellows are desperate to cover up the fact that they completely dropped the ball. Supposedly, they've been falsely accused."

"I wish you would say they were instead of 'supposedly.' And? What's this crime they're being falsely accused of?"

"The charges are insubordination, noncompliance, and willful friendly fire."

"Insubordination! Noncompliance! Willful friendly fire! Those are serious offenses. That can't be what actually happened. What in the world did they do?"

"Well, it happened while they were defending the port. I'll explain in detail."

Upon hearing the circumstances and how things turned out, I feel sick to my stomach. Unbelievable incompetence. Incorrigible imbecility. And on top of that, a hopeless lack of imagination.

"So we paid tuition to the teacher called experience on the eastern front while waste-of-oxygen officers in the rear haven't even learned from those hard-won lessons? Should we write them off and prescribe lead bullets?"

"…Watch your mouth, Colonel Degurechaff."

I try to choose my next words carefully and rephrase. "Please send all those incompetent commanders and MPs to the eastern front. I'll throw them in front of the Federation Army and teach them what real war is like."

If your subordinates make a mistake, it's your job as their superior to take responsibility. But if your subordinates are being evaluated unfairly, you have to go to bat for them. Always.

That's Meritocracy 101. Ability must be evaluated fairly. If Meybert and Tospan are both idiots, they should both be punished. If they did the right thing, then the true fools should be strung up in the streets.

"The honor of my—*my*—subordinates has been brought into question because these fools are trying to pass blame for their own failures!"

My career may be in the balance as well. I absolutely refuse to let this tyranny stand.

In response to Tanya openly protesting with such passion, Lergen groans like his head hurts. "…I'm with you, Colonel. You're right to be angry. This tyranny indeed must not be allowed to stand."

"They're both going to be released, right?"

"Of course. I went down there myself to talk to the MPs."

"I appreciate it."

He waves his hands to indicate that there's no need. "Formally, it's the Lergen Kampfgruppe that is involved. I should handle at least this much."

Nodding in general agreement, Tanya smoothly inserts a request for compensation. "There's a probably a medal in it for them, too, right?"

"That's a perfectly reasonable request, Colonel. Actually, submarine command has kept their heads about them. It's thanks to them we were able to confirm the truth of the matter. They're quick. They've already written a thank-you along with a recommendation for awards."

"So the ones who have experience with the world outside a bunker are sensible?"

Lergen replies to Tanya's nonchalant comment with a meaningful smile. "That's exactly right, Colonel. *People with knowledge of the outside world* must still have some capacity for objective judgment."

His words contain deep implications. Reservations, perhaps you could say, regarding people who haven't seen the outside world. *So things are that bad in the home country, huh?* Tanya realizes and puts a hand over her mouth in case its corners twitch ambiguously.

"Sectionalism, a deficient imagination. And so our best and most faithful officers go to their deaths on the eastern front? Won't the core of the Imperial Army crumble at that rate?" Oh, wait. Realizing I should be precise, I correct myself. "Strictly speaking, I suppose I should say 'collapse' rather than 'crumble.'"

"Are you complaining, Colonel?"

"…Terribly sorry, sir." I straighten up and meet his eye as I tender my apology. "I believe I've surpassed the bounds of what a mere field officer is allowed to say. I do hope you can forgive me."

"You're fine, Colonel."

Lergen smiles like a coconspirator as he waves off my concern. In other words, he's implicitly condoning my remark. So that's the Empire's current status? Unworldly fellows, take a proper whiff of the outside world's air.

"All right, Colonel. Let's talk business."

"Yes, sir."

"General Rudersdorf is waiting for you. Apparently, General Romel has been raving about your achievements. I realize it's a minor consolation, but… you should be able to expect a decoration out of that, too."

"An award? I mean, it's an honor, of course, but isn't it a bit soon? Surely the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps has yet to file any relevant paperwork."

Tanya points out that they have only just returned home, but Lergen raises a hand to stop her. "I suppose we have a gap in experience. Outwardly, you're correct, but remember, I'm an insider."

"By which you mean?'

"I used to be chief of decorations. The standards and regulations for awarding them have changed since the start of the war, true, but I'm confident in my predictions in this area."

How dependable the pronouncements of someone familiar with the bureaucratic apparatus are. This is what's so great about the elites who come and go between Operations and Admin!

Honestly, I almost envy him. Even though he's such a great superior

officer!

Akhhh, but I'd still love to be in his position.

"That said, wearing a bevy of medals only gets you so far."

"…Too true. Much better to boast to your grandchildren during peacetime than to proudly wear a bunch of medals during the war."

"Are you married, Colonel von Lergen?"

"Before the war started, there was a plan, but once the fighting started, it all came to nothing. Once this is over, I'll give it some thought again." He casually continues, "Once the war's over, you'll be about the right age to start thinking about it as well. Ahhh, maybe I overstepped. I hope you'll forget I said anything."

Tanya simply nods with a polite, vague smile. "I hope we can laugh about such comical moments and look back on them fondly."

"Indeed."

"Let's do whatever it takes to put an end to this. I've been promised I'll get to live on royalties after the war, so I'm looking forward to that."

He must have been taken by surprise. Lergen looks as dazed as a pigeon that's been shot with a peashooter—a rare occurrence. "Royalties?"

"General Rudersdorf said he'd write a picture book, and he promised me the royalties."

"…A picture book? The general?"

In response to his disbelieving look, Tanya nods, agreeing that it's only natural to doubt the story. That stern, boulder-like general writing a book for children! That'll be the day.

All you can really say in response is that sometimes people have surprising hobbies.

"Yes, a picture book produced by General von Rudersdorf with me as the protagonist. He said he would write it once the war is over. Isn't that an interesting project?"

"That does sound like fun. I hope you'll treat me to a cup of coffee."

"With pleasure. Anyhow, I'm going to get back to making the rounds."

"All right, Colonel. Since you're here, have this A ration coupon. Take some chocolate, wine, coffee—whatever you like—from the General Staff's meager supply."

"Are you sure?"

I know it must be a valuable coupon and try to refuse, but Lergen insists.

“I’ll look forward to calling in a favor after the war. At least the price of a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, sir. Then if you’ll excuse me.”

After watching her go, Lergen sighs.

“…Royalties, huh?”

Even that young girl probably knew that such an innocent dream wouldn’t come true. How miserable.

“Colonel, I really hope that day comes for you.”

There was no silver bullet, the sword of Damocles was hanging precipitously over them, and there were only the faintest signs of a backup plan.

To someone who knew how things were before the war, a few years ago felt like another dimension.

How and why had things come to this?

When the theory of total war was first presented, Lergen had avoided it as a taboo. But today, that attitude was no longer an option.

No, it was actually unforgivable.

He was a soldier and a staff officer.

Believing in the breakthrough that would change the tide of total war, the fatherland raised a foundation of flesh and blood… If, as the mountain of corpses of young soldiers and the Empire’s territory was scorched away, amid the widespread laments of the nobles, one had to continue waging war…?

*I can’t very well furrow my brow as if the war doesn’t concern me. This is reality. This is reality.*

*Fucking hell.*

With that new warmth in her pocket and her excellent mood continuing unabated, Tanya makes her rounds in high spirits. She saves Lieutenant General Rudersdorf for the very end, as if he is the most important stop.

Even if Lieutenant General Zettour out east is my actual boss, it’s only natural for anyone to be friendly with an influential, capable officer in the same organization who has close ties with their superior. And if there’s a medal coming up, the least Tanya could do was say hello.

“It’s Lieutenant Colonel Degurechaff, sir!”

"Come in, Colonel."

Rudersdorf invites her in, and he looks the same as usual—a rather tired expression on his face but the same dislike of anything unnecessary.

He gets straight to the point in conversation as well. "I've heard what you've been up to." He claps in amusement as he continues. "A cruiser, a carrier, and multiple destroyers! You could even ask for a medal from the navy. Of course, we'll award you on our end, too. You can bet on that."

"With all due respect, everything I achieved, I did together with my troops. I also need to thank the submarine command. Without the navy's support, we never would have been able to pull it off."

"Probably a word to the Technical Arsenal as well, hmm?"

"…Yes, you're right, sir. I am…grateful…to them, too."

Even as mere formality, expressing appreciation to that mad doctor is mentally taxing. To put it more bluntly, thanking the guys who would stuff people into V-2s…goes against human nature.

"It was Chief Engineer Schugel's team, right? They sure built us a masterful weapon."

The general seems moved, so of course, I'm forced to interrupt. "With all due respect, I would suggest that we don't overvalue the V-2. We may have succeeded once, but expecting the same results a second time should probably be considered a fantasy."

"Oh? Care to explain your reasoning?"

Tanya nods and launches into her explanation. "The trick has already been revealed once."

"You mean to say that the enemy now knows that mages attacking from underwater is a possibility?"

"Yes, sir. The element of surprise has been greatly diminished if not lost entirely. They'll probably be on a borderline pathological lookout for mana signals in the water from now on. I don't think we'll be able to replicate our results."

Rudersdorf winces in understanding. "…So they can just withdraw as soon as they detect the mana signals in the water."

"Exactly, sir. And since they'll definitely station marine mages on carriers and other capital ships, the risk that they respond quickly and effectively jumps up. Personally, I'm sure they will be prepared next time."

The V-2, by virtue of being a guided torpedo, is in essence still an

imperial torpedo. That means unlike a shell or formula, the fastest it can go is forty knots, if that. Thirty is already considered good.

Regardless of how they perform against sluggish battleships, they're entirely too slow to go after carriers. Frankly, there are too many elements left up to luck if we want to go after any target that's on high alert.

"What about for regular attacks?"

"They're better than the V-1, but that's all. I think the V-2 still has too many issues to work out."

"The concept of a guided torpedo is just so attractive."

Tanya gives him a nod to be polite. It's utterly natural that the brains of the army would have high expectations for guided missiles and torpedoes given the reputation these new weapons have for a dramatic increase in achieving direct hits.

The only issue is, of course, the guidance method.

"They aren't fully automatic yet. They depend too much on the pilot's ability. This time it was the 203rd piloting—I'm sure I don't need to remind you how highly trained my battalion is."

"You mean only veterans can handle them?"

"No." I shake my head. "Strictly speaking, most veterans won't be of any use, either. There aren't enough mage units familiar with maritime operations."

"That's strange. Why do you say that?"

"It's a technical detail that has a lot to do with being an aerial mage; would you like me to explain it?"

The general nods, so I begin to explain as simply as I can.

"It's a difference in navigation method. We generally use terrestrial navigation."

"Elaborate."

"We go by the lay of the land as we fly. Over the sea, where there aren't any distinguishable landmarks, I anticipate a lot of problems—even for seasoned veterans. These days most of the troops receive accelerated training, and among them are some who haven't even nailed down terrestrial navigation. Our ground-controlled interception is just too good. More than a few of these guys can only do wireless navigation, which entirely relies on guidance from the ground."

Instead of being the job of the mage, navigation gets outsourced to ground

control units. That's efficient, and their results have certainly seen a bump. At the same time, however, it has caused a sudden loss of navigation know-how among mages.

A striking example of how being thoroughly efficient with outsourcing leads to a weakening of the core.

"Should we start drumming celestial navigation into aerial mages again?"

"In my position, all I can think is that if we have the time to do that, then…"

"I see what you're getting at. On that point, Zettour was telling me something silly."

"Sir…?"

"It's about you, actually."

"I have no idea. What sort of thing about me?"

Lieutenant General Zettour out on the eastern front? When I ask what he said, Rudersdorf seems eager to elaborate.

"He was comparing the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion to the troops who have been through accelerated training."

"I can't even imagine what the comparison might be. May I inquire as to what he said?"

"Apparently, a young first lieutenant claimed, 'There wouldn't be any point to fighting with even numbers. We would win with half or even a third of our personnel.'"

*Ahhh.* I pound my palm with my fist when I realize who the amused general is talking about. "That must be Lieutenant Grantz. I could see him saying something like that to General Zettour."

"Is his evaluation accurate, do you think?"

"Strictly speaking, no."

"So he was just talking big?"

He gives Tanya a hard look, but she smiles easily.

"No, he's learned to be more modest. As his superior, I'm glad to see my subordinate employing some restraint."

"What do you mean?"

"General, the gap between the accelerated-training graduates and veterans is unspeakably vast. With all due respect, do you really think they could fight on even footing with my seasoned veterans with even triple the numbers?"

That's an insult. And contemptuous. My unit didn't get to where they are

today by kicking back.

In response to this poor evaluation, as commander of the unit, I need to raise my voice slightly and express my displeasure in an obvious way. What do you think the point of having elite troops is?

"My unit doesn't report directly to the General Staff just for show. Of course, if you asked us to go up against three times the number of enemy elites, we would probably crash and burn, but…" I pause to take a breath. "Why wouldn't we be able to kick the asses of a bunch of raw recruits who might not even have a hundred flight hours? My vets are Named, you know."

"I see. Just a different breed."

"Exactly. That was the job. And it continues to be the job."

In response to Tanya's considerable pride, Rudersdorf pounds his fist as if to say, *That's it!*

"I understand, and I thank you, Colonel. So if they're that well-developed…what if we split them up and turned them into the core personnel of other units?"

"Wait, what? …P-please, anything but that."

"But in terms of personnel development, that would be the quickest and most efficient method."

"I understand, sir, but I've drilled them so they can work together as a cohesive whole. There aren't many who have had the officer education that would help them become core personnel, and they haven't been trained for that in any practical sense, either. And more than anything, if my unit were cannibalized, the Kampfgruppe would…"

"I'm kidding, Colonel." Tanya is still frantically stringing words together when he finally stops her and continues with a mischievous grin. "Trust me. I have no intention of handing your knights over to the pawns."

"…Thank you."

"Though I do sometimes wish we had the time to."

I decide to file his grumbled remark away in my heart. Though he's joking, his words alone have given me a keen sense of how pressing the lack of time has become.

For now, we can still laugh about it.

That is, the problem is serious enough that it requires a smile. If nothing else, it's time to face the reality that the general is taking it that way.

"Are you informed of the current war situation, Colonel?"

“Sir?”

The general who hates anything unnecessary and dislikes debate is chitchatting? Seized by a bad premonition, I take a small but deep breath to try and maintain my calm.

What is this going to be about?

“Come along with me for a little chat, Colonel.”

“If that’s your order, sir.”

“I can’t order you. But I should be able to request it.”

A request from the boss of Operations in the General Staff! Who in the world could politely decline such a thing?

“…If that’s your request, General.”

“The current situation is not bad.”

“I don’t mean to parrot your words back at you, sir, but ‘not bad’?”

The comment catches me off guard, so I allow the confusion it inspires to register on my face. Honestly, even saying there isn’t much to be optimistic about is already a more optimistic way of looking at things than I’m comfortable with, at this point.

“With Zettour solidifying our hold on the eastern front, we have some breathing room here to think about the west and south. Also, our strategic reserves have finally returned to the fold.”

“Strategic reserves, sir?”

“I’m an Operations man. Troop numbers are always giving me a headache. Thankfully, the Council for Self-Government out east has done good work. There’s promising signs that they’ll act as a shield for the Empire, and they are most welcome.”

That remark gives me pause. I can appreciate the role of the council made up of locals established on the eastern front insofar as it is meant to counter partisans.

Frankly, I don’t think it’s possible to expect much else out of it.

“Are they good for anything beyond padding for defense in depth?”

“They’ll offer a division’s worth or so.”

“…General, I mention this purely out of obligation: Conscription in occupied territory is a clear violation of war law.”

“Hmph.” Rudersdorf sniffs before declaring, “That only applies to conscription.”

For a moment, I fail to understand the significance of his words. If

conscripts are indeed not allowed and they're not conscripts, then that can only mean…volunteers.

It's a similar enough matter, but the question is whether there are real volunteers.

"No! They're volunteering?! No matter how many rewards we line up, all a recruit would get in return is a trip to the eastern trenches!"

"I thought the same thing."

"General." I feel compelled to offer advice based on my vivid experiences on the front lines. "No matter what form it takes, that would essentially be forced enlistment, and that's too dangerous. There must be a lot of hostility for the Empire roiling just below the surface. Arming soldiers who harbor such feelings will force us into the position of always having to watch our backs."

"Thankfully, they're true volunteers."

"You mean beyond formality?"

"We've promised them independence after the war." He smiles cheerfully. "The Empire will officially recognize their independent spirit, defend them if necessary, and even help them develop."

"I'm surprised Supreme Command allowed that. Not that I mean any disrespect, but things seem to be going…much better than what General Zettour had led me to believe."

"Colonel, a word of warning: Don't speculate."

"My apologies, sir."

In response to my show of feigned shame, Rudersdorf softens his voice and says it's nothing to worry about. Though his hand has nervously clenched around his cigar.

As far as I can tell, there's a faint, lingering tension. If a central figure with a career as a staff officer can't hide it, then the stress must be considerable.

What's it about?

"I'll just use what you've stated already: Strictly speaking, the 'promise' isn't real."

"Huh?"

"Supreme Command has expressed an interest in acquiring new territory in the east."

"What? N-new territory?"

Territorial ambitions in the east? Of all the ridiculous—that *completely* negates the entire deal that's apparently been struck with the Council for Self-Government. If the Federation Communists find out, they'll give us a round of applause.

The Empire doesn't have the strength to hold any territory in the east—and it isn't as if there any good reasons to do so or obvious benefits that would merit the effort involved. Trying to take on something too unwieldly like that will only lose us potential allies—it's the height of folly. If someone wants that swamp, we should just give it to them!

"They want the depth. And to make up for losses. There will be reparation demands. In that case, why not have the Federation give some land up?"

"Lately, I've had this feeling…"

"What might that be?"

"That maybe the Empire's homeland is connected to another world. Even in my brief time here, it's hard to believe we're living in the same universe."

As far as Tanya knows, the Empire should be a country that is capable of calculating their interests. So how the hell did they end up using such a messed-up abacus? The Empire may have a tendency to favor a militant style of thinking, but I would have thought, then, that it would at least consistently apply that perspective across the board.

"As someone who has set foot in that other world, I'll say this much: Relax, Colonel. You're not the only one who thinks that way."

"I was hoping you would deny it…"

"…This is reality. A daydream feels more realistic."

"Reality is the true horror of our time."

This is what it means to get a chill up your spine. Having a lieutenant general essentially welcome me to another world with a straight face isn't the most helpful thing for maintaining my sanity.

Without realizing how Tanya feels, Rudersdorf begins to chuckle in amusement. "In other words, our current situation isn't so bad. Do you disagree, Colonel?"

"I don't think I'm in a position to comment."

"Say whatever comes to mind."

"But I'm only a lieutenant colonel."

Rudersdorf waves a hand to tell me to cut it out and continues, "Don't waste time. It's like I always tell you. You obviously don't agree with me. So

come right out and tell me what you really think."

"Is that an order, sir?"

"It's an order."

I guess if I have to…but wait. Then I should request some insurance. Last time didn't work out as planned, so this time I definitely want a lifeline.

"Even if what I say is extremely rude?"

"I don't care."

Well, in that case… I take a breath and choose my words carefully. "There's no need to be euphemistic about the fact that we have no chance at winning."

"Defeatism, Colonel?"

"No, I am merely pointing out the objective truth." After another deep breath, I brace myself and press on. "At present, victory is far away. More accurately speaking, I should probably say that it's far outside our reach."

Awareness of impending defeat.

It's a frank expression of our current situation.

If they weren't almost like family—no, if there weren't a minimum level of trust—Tanya would never have survived voicing this thought aloud.

"We've probably reached the point where it's time to start figuring out how to convince the people on the home front of our current reality."

My opinion on our present circumstances is extremely concise and clear.

At best, it'll be a stalemate.

We can try as hard as we possibly can and hopefully get lucky, because even then, the best we'll be able to snatch from the jaws of defeat is a stalemate. It doesn't make any sense to hope for any other outcome. That's why it's time to begin processing our impending defeat, using the word *compromise* indirectly. The public may have to be convinced and the government may need to get the ball rolling—our only option is to start getting resourceful like that.

However, Rudersdorf's reaction is far from sympathetic. He glares at me suspiciously. "Colonel, I just want to confirm. Are you saying the army should interfere in politics?"

"Both my personal opinion and the regulations I know by heart want to say no. But in our current situation, I think it's difficult to imagine a viable alternative."

Actively working to end the war.

I don't want to admit it, but I, a classically liberal anti-Communist… Tanya herself is advocating for the military to intervene politically. If it were the Middle Ages, she probably would have invoked words like *sacred peace* despite the urge to recite a litany of grudges against Being X.

"So both you and Colonel Lergen are all about politics now, eh? If you want to talk about politics, retire from active service first."

Rudersdorf's commonsense reply speaks to his resolute conscience as a soldier. He's probably right that Tanya, an active-duty officer, shouldn't be saying such things.

Of course, I would like to point out that it wasn't my choice to be in the army in the first place.

"If I could retire, I would rip off my uniform and march into parliament."

"Colonel Degurechaff, you're an outstanding soldier, but you don't seem to know much about politics."

"Huh?"

"There's an age requirement to participate. Didn't you know that?"

"…Do excuse me. It's just that the elderly seem to keep making such a mess of things, I couldn't help but… Ah, never mind."

"You couldn't help but what?"

"I had the feeling that even someone like me could do something."

Without a superior officer who would grin teasingly about how biting her comment really was, Tanya would never have been able to get away with such remarks. Conversely, though, it means Rudersdorf, a high-ranking officer of the Reich, is enough of a free spirit that he can let it go.

"Tell me what you can do as an active-duty officer."

I nod and immediately kick my brain into high gear. The bureaucratic method is probably the most efficient way to cut through bureaucratic regulations.

Tanks should fight tanks; mages should fight mages. *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* is an inviolable rule.

"In order for the correct political calls to be made, and in order to fulfill our weighty responsibility of giving counsel to the emperor, we should offer our advice directly. It depends on the interpretation, but…we have the authority to give an appropriate explanation, don't we?"

"By which you mean?"

"It could take the form of schooling the emperor on the state of the war, or

perhaps a ranking member of the General Staff can relay an account of pertinent events."

These are common types of explanations that bureaucrats often give. The way of smacking someone over the head with data and knowledge till they are forced to understand. It may not be a very effective way to convince others to buy in emotionally, but in a pinch, it's still a fairly restrained option.

"General, don't we have the power and responsibility to explain the situation to the highest decision makers?"

"And that's how we'll put pressure on them? Unfortunately, when it comes to military affairs, I'm sure you know we have the aide-de-camp and liaison officer. How would we get around them?"

"…They're both colleagues. We can explain to them about military affairs."

"What do you hope to gain by piling exceptions onto exceptions?"

This is undoubtedly a nonstandard procedure. It deviates a great deal from the norm.

But the only ones who will be forgiven for doing things according to procedure and dying in the course of their duties are the rank and file… When officers get soldiers killed by sticking to the rules, it only serves as proof of their ineptitude.

"Because otherwise, sir, it's a deadlock! Let's go directly to the government!"

"Just because it's a deadlock doesn't mean we can blow the rules to smithereens."

"General! Then are you giving the status quo tacit approval?!" Without thinking, I raise my voice, abandoning all sense of decorum. He's just being so stubborn, and this conversation is going nowhere. Frankly, I'm disappointed.

The stance that the army shouldn't meddle in politics is a typical display of admirable self-restraint. A textbook example.

But that is a peacetime virtue.

This is war, and war is simply an extension of politics.

"If war is a political endeavor, then why should the army, the ones actually waging it, not be allowed to have a say? General, we have a duty to tell them what needs to be said!"

"Shut up!" Rudersdorf strikes his desk with a bang and gives me a

scathing glare, then roughly chomps on his cigar. Taking a full drag, he exhales right into my face as if to demand my full attention before continuing in a stern tone.

"…We're soldiers. Remember that. We're not the brains, Colonel."

"Yes, sir. I overstepped."

"No matter. This awareness will only become more important going forward… Don't forget it."

His words carry a strange weight.

It will *become more important*. At some point in the future.

Still, Tanya von Degurechaff, who has vowed her loyalty to the emperor and the fatherland, even if only as a formality, can't think of any particular reason she should be warned not to express an interest in politics.

"General, if you don't mind…"

"Be quiet and listen, Colonel."

"Yes, sir."

"Supreme Command is considering seizing Ildoa."

"…Ildoa? Seizing it?"

There's no room to ask why.

But I emit a tiny sigh, wondering how anyone could be so foolish.

"If we kill the mediator, who will broker the peace talks?"

"Why should a soldier bother thinking about that?"

Is he just saying, *So what*? Or standing idly by? In an odd tone of voice, Rudersdorf questions himself between puffs of purple smoke.

"We're soldiers. As long as we're soldiers, we should remember that it's none of our concern, no?"

"General, your devotion as a soldier is only a superficial good. For the world and our state, not to mention the Reich and even our Heimat, please consider this for a moment."

Even I'm shocked by the words coming out of my mouth.

How did I end up spouting stuff that makes me sound like one of the Kakushinha fanatics or some other idiot arguing for a military dictatorship?! It's just so—! I can only marvel at how far gone the world is.

Arrrgh, this stupid fucking world.

Curse whoever is responsible.

"We're soldiers!"

"And, Colonel? What of it?"

“We’re soldiers who have sworn allegiance to the emperor and the fatherland!”

I don’t have so much as a smidgen of patriotism in my heart, but a contract is a contract. If you read the duties involved in the military service Tanya vowed to uphold closely, you see that protecting the fatherland is one of them.

As a military officer forced to love her country, she must make this declaration.

“We can’t leave it up to fate!”

“Just as we trust our brothers-in-arms, we should leave politics to the experts.”

“But—!”

The sound of a bang against the desk cuts that thought short. It goes without saying that the owner of the fist that interrupted Tanya is Rudersdorf.

“I appreciate you offering your opinion, Colonel. This has been a *stimulating* exchange.”

His response perfectly embodies his resolute rejection of my proposal; nothing further will be tolerated. From the look in his eyes, it’s all too clear that there’s no room for me to object. It’s time to withdraw. I quickly make a beeline for the path of retreat that’s been offered.

“Thank you for bearing with me, sir.”

“I need you to persevere a little longer, Colonel.”

“Of course—I’ll focus completely on my duties!”

“Good.”

Tanya leaves respectfully with a quick “Then, if you’ll excuse me…,” but internally, I’m irritated. If I had to verbalize it: *Don’t involve me.*

Honestly, it feels like the smallest possible request.

Please, anything but getting me caught up in whatever *this* is. I let out a sigh. If the Empire is going to die, then I’ll have to evacuate, even if it’s just me.

I have no intention of sacrificing myself.

In the end, there’s no such thing as a happy marriage between an organization and an individual. An individual’s only choice is to marry their abilities. But that doesn’t change the truth that Tanya has committed herself to this organization thus far.

Will that mean all my labor has been for nothing? What a shame.

“Haaah.” Another sigh escapes into the hallway of the General Staff Office.

What started out as a simple intent to stay in touch ended up strengthening my desire to switch careers. Things just never go as planned. I’m feeling quite gloomy, maybe just one step away from despair. My mood is more overcast than the sky over the imperial capital. That’s when a hand claps me casually on the shoulder.

“Colonel Degurechaff, do you have a moment?”

“General Romel?!”

Tanya turns around in shock to find the general with a look on his face that says he’s up to something.

“I never got a chance to thank you for assisting our withdrawal. It must be fate that we met here today. I’d be very pleased if I could borrow you briefly.”

“I only did what needed to be done, sir.”

He waves off the modesty as usual—like he was saying *We’ll have none of that, now!* Despite everything, this man is the same as usual. What a straightforward fellow. And his stiff expression…must be a polite smile.

“Sometimes you want to reminisce with your war buddies, no?”

“And you’d like me to join you on a trip down memory lane?”

“By all means.”

I can tell that much due to the close bond we formed after spending time together in the south. Considering the timing, it must be more than a simple thank-you.

“It’s a damned shame I can’t offer you a drink but how about a cup of coffee?”

Tanya nods amiably to accept. “I’m grateful for the invitation, General.”

## THE SAME DAY, EVENING, IMPERIAL ARMY OFFICERS’ CLUB

In a private room at the Imperial Army Officers’ Club, not far from the General Staff Office…

Since it’s a place where alcohol is served, a member of the military police

starts in on the "no minors allowed" spiel, but a flash of General Romel's insignia stops that in its tracks.

What a refreshingly magnificent display of authority, pushing through with the simple line, "I'm sure it won't be a problem." As one might expect, it seems that once you're a general, you can throw your weight around even at the officers' club.

By the time the utterance "Get us a private room" causes a space appropriate for confidential discussions to magically appear, I have gained a clear understanding of the power differentials inside the Imperial Army.

Tanya has flashed her lieutenant colonel insignia at a beer hall before and still been forced out with the expected "It's the rules."

Wait, hold on. I shake my head and switch into entertaining mode.

*Going drinking with General von Romel will probably require some finesse*…is what I had been thinking, but that goes out the window the moment he declares, "I'm drinking." That instant, he sets a whole bottle of distilled spirits on the table and begins gulping it down like it's water; that's slightly odd.

As I silently sip my herbal tea, the only thing on my mind is the cause of the unsteady vibes the general is giving off.

How much has he already had? After reaching the bottom of at least one bottle, he lightly shakes his head. "Don't believe what you can see is all there is… Especially when it comes to General Rudersdorf's attitude."

"Huh?"

General Romel seemed dead-drunk, but maybe he wasn't as far gone as I first suspected. Maybe his face just gets red easily? I can hear the spirits taking effect from his speech, but still, he murmurs, "He's a wily one. An extra-wily one. Give your cheek a good pinch before you get tricked."

Even Tanya can't say, *I know, sir*, in this situation. Romel may be drunk, but it's too dangerous to underestimate his memory and intelligence.

When I politely feign ignorance, Romel grumbles. "You're General Zettour's pawn— Do I really have to convince you how merciless those two are? Stop thinking of General Rudersdorf as a single-celled molecule."

"General?"

"I'm sure there are tons of headless eyes and ears in the capital. There must be."

"…Huh?"

Even if he's drunk, this is a bit…

"Do you have any idea how poorly the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps was treated? You probably don't. But I do. To be frank, we were outrageously abandoned. We were forgotten."

"And then forced to withdraw for political reasons?"

"When necessary, even the fellows in command can keep these things in mind." He grunts as he takes another swig of his drink and continues his rant. "Political expediency is costing the rank and file too much. The army is a tool for the nation to meet its goals, but it's also a group of living, breathing humans."

Complaints…? No. This goes deeper than that. Something is gathering strength from the alcohol and rising to the surface.

"Even the soldiers getting ground into dust are alive."

"I do believe that goes without saying, sir."

"Absolutely. I don't really need to stress this point to a field officer like yourself." Openly sympathizing with Tanya as a colleague, the man shrugs. "We returned by boat, separate from you. And what do you suppose was waiting for us when we arrived in the capital…? A ceremony to celebrate our triumphant return."

"Huh?"

"Listen and be flabbergasted, Colonel. The official story is that the Southern Continent Expeditionary Corps is returning in triumph. Word's going round that we achieved a major victory, and they're even being extra generous with medals because we accomplished our mission."

He pings a finger against the medal hanging off his uniform and starts laughing in an odd manner, his drink in his other hand.

"So?"

"So? It's like I said. Apparently, I'm a winner."

His voice isn't unhinged. He seems drunk, but his voice is utterly calm. What's hidden at the base of his voice, completely unblemished by alcohol, is a searing rage that renders Tanya speechless.

"The glory of victory, credit as a hero. And the reputation of an honorable soldier, I suppose. I really wanted those things—that's right. I'm a soldier, too."

"A soldier in pursuit of individual fame is a bit…"

"I suppose it's not something I should be saying to someone with the

Silver Wings. But it's true that I had a smoldering yearning for glory and fame. Saying I wanted those things isn't a lie." As those words tumble out of him, I have to wonder if that's how he truly feels. "Do you know why officers in the field carry out their orders, Colonel? What I think is that it's for looks. *Then* it becomes duty. And by the time the end is near, it's all internalized. In the beginning, though, it's only about not wanting to get laughed at—what amounts to petty pride." He clunks his glass down on the table and chuckles softly. "And now that petty pride is aching." Topping off his drink, he sneers again. "I wanted to claim victory and renown. I wanted to be a winner. I don't want to steal like the politicians and let my gains become unsightly flab."

"…That's what you were after, General?"

"Yes," he murmurs with a faraway look in his eyes as he drains his glass. "The country's position is a simple one. This is a 'necessary measure to maintain morale.' Necessary? Maintain morale? What a joke. They call that stopgap playacting politics? Bah."

"Excuse me, General. You seem to be drinking an awful lot. Even if this establishment is part of the General Staff Office, I think…"

"Yes, I'm saying too much, I know. And I'm well aware that I'm criticizing the brass under the guise of simply griping."

This comment is much more clearheaded than I expected it to be. I've got a bad feeling about this. That said, I force myself to say what I believe it is my duty to say.

"Then allow me to remind you that we are only soldiers—and officers in the business of conducting operations, at that. Though I realize it's blunt of me to say so, you are no exception, sir."

"Yes, you're right, Colonel. When I complained to the government about being called Romel the Victor, they told me the same thing." Furrowing his brow in disgust, the general continues grumbling. "Lieutenant generals are in no position to discuss strategy. For the nation's political purposes, I must meekly accept the honor of my triumphant return. I'll never forget the moment they told me."

"You're saying quite a bit more than you should, sir. Have you had too much to drink?"

"The Heimat's spirits move me. I had a hell of a time finding a drink in the desert. You'll understand when you're old enough, Colonel. This is the

good stuff." His loving gaze focuses on the liquor. Honestly, it's quite high proof. I literally don't understand how he can drink it like it's water.

"Most of what we could get on the southern continent was Ildoan wine. Our so-called 'friend' refused to give us bullets, but they made sure to send over a couple bottles as a token of our 'friendship.'"

I can definitely see them doing that. I nod unconsciously. Gasoline, wine, blood. Only Ildoan diplomacy could view all those as equal in value.

As someone working in the field, Tanya is sure she understands why Romel is upset. The risks far outweigh the returns.

"The friend politics gave us. And my men who died because of political blunders!"

"…That's the state of things."

"Yes, Colonel. This is our reality."

A helpless loneliness comes through in his acidic reply.

"Give a medal to the man whose subordinates were killed by shitty politicians mishandling the situation! I'm a big fan of medals, but this one I'm sure I'll never be able to like."

If this weren't an officers' club, I would be concerned about who might be listening. "General, with all due respect, the standards for—"

"Ha-ha-ha! I guess my opening remarks have gone on too long."

"General?"

*Clunk.*

He puts his glass down again, but this time he doesn't fill it and just stares at Tanya as he speaks. "We've sworn, Colonel, to defend the emperor and the fatherland. We can't forget our vows."

"I agree."

"So…if politics is the problem, it has to be solved."

"But that's not a soldier's job. Just earlier, General Rudersdorf ordered me to keep that in mind."

I'm not exactly satisfied with the way things are going, either; I'd like to scream from the rooftops that we'll never be able to reverse the slow decline at this rate. The hourglass has run through its sands of reason and is nearly out of time as well. I still firmly believe that I should do everything in my power to turn things around as long as my personal safety isn't endangered.

But I'm but one part of an organization. Individuals can't accomplish anything on their own.

“We’re soldiers. Acting at our own discretion is possible only because our shared objective is clear and we have the authority to choose how to approach the goals necessary to achieve it. Determining both the objective and the goal at your own discretion is only ever a despotic overstep of one’s authority.”

“Our objective is to guarantee the safety of the state—that is, to secure peace for the fatherland and the emperor. The goal is mainly to eliminate military threats to the Empire.”

He suddenly reins in his tone to deliver this line that sounds like a public-facing policy. When he asks, “Is it not?” Tanya has no choice but to nod in agreement.

And in truth, that *is* the contract under which imperial soldiers serve.

“Yes, that’s true, General. Our duty is to eliminate military threats. Organized interference in politics is beyond the scope of—”

“If there is a military threat in the realm of politics, then surely that can be considered a valid military target. If necessary, we should be prepared to act on our own discretion.”

“…You can’t be serious!”

My expression is on the brink of twisting up. That’s not even funny. But I manage to mask it with a smile. Well, I intended to smile anyhow.

“General, you’ve definitely had one too many.”

Any more than this is nuts. I shouldn’t listen to any more. I’ve definitely made that decision far too late, but now that I’ve seen how dangerous this is, I need to leave immediately.

Tanya stands up in a hurry and abruptly makes an excuse. “I’ll go and look for your adjutant. It’s your first time back in the capital after a long time away. I think you should brush off the dust of the south and take a nice rest to recover from all your hard-fought battles.”

But her efforts to gloss over the situation are rendered meaningless by the general’s reply.

“My mind is sound.”

“…You really mean what you say, sir?”

When he silently nods, she’s out of options. Because now that she knows, she no longer has the choice to not find out.

*Guess it’s time to grit my teeth.* Tanya emits a tiny sigh.

“Then, General. Do tell me whatever it is you want to say. But I’d like to discuss it when you’re sober.”

“Let’s do that. I see you don’t appreciate the finer points of drinking… Well, I guess my method was the issue in this case. There’s not much point in waxing poetic about alcohol to a minor.” He laughs bitterly and promises to organize a future meeting. “Tomorrow, then, as you wish. Hmm. How about we talk at my garrison?”

“Understood. I’ll pay you a visit in the afternoon.”

Seemingly satisfied by Tanya’s suggestion, he makes a note of the meeting on his calendar. This way, he can’t make the excuse that he remembers things differently due to the alcohol. Of course, Tanya no longer has the option of running away from this meeting anymore, either.

“But before we get to the main topic…let me tell you one interesting story. It’s just a bit of insignificant fluff, but I think you’ll find it compelling.”

“Is it about our current era?”

He replies with a grin. “Yes. With a career longer than yours, I’m able to pick up on that much more. Having returned from battle, I can smell the disquiet in the air at the General Staff Office.”

“Disquiet, sir?”

“I did a little investigating in search of that scent…and I heard something interesting.”

“I hope it’s some total nonsense.”

It’s obviously not, but there’s no reason to side with despair, is there? My reply is just in case, reflecting the distant hope for a rare bit of luck.

In response, the corners of Romel’s mouth ease into an amused smile.

“Yes, it’s a silly joke, really. A backup plan, I think it was called? Well, I’ll give you a good laugh next time we meet.”

“Like a Plan B? I beg your pardon, but does that mean…there’s a Plan A?”

“Are we sounding each other out now, Colonel? To be blunt, we should probably say there *was* one. Colonel Lergen’s overtures in Ildoa were probably the crux of Plan A.”

Romel’s comments regarding this supposed Plan B are simple and clear.

“Every army puts too much stock in plans. We have a planned goal, but that’s what enables us to play things by ear and act on our own discretion, no? At any rate”—he stands—“I’ll see you tomorrow, Colonel. It was fun having you accompany me tonight.”

Listening to his parting comments behind her, Tanya stares, stunned, into her cup.

I don't need to wait till tomorrow. It's all too clear what Romel is trying to say with his hints. It's unmistakable.

At least part of the Imperial Army is eager to do it.

Let's set aside the macro view for a moment. It's clear that things are still moving. If it's Plan B, it must be a backup.

So how long will it stay a backup?

*...What should I do?*

## JULY 23, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE JOURNAL OF GENERAL VON ROMEL'S ADJUTANT

Colonel Degurechaff visited to hear what the General Staff is thinking and be given an outline. Heard about the overall situation on the eastern front as well as some general information about the Battle of the West. The situation in the skies over the western front seem to be in rather dire straits.

The lines in the east are at a standstill, yet the war of attrition rages on.

After their official business, the general and Tanya chatted about personal topics.

P.S.

HQ presented her with coffee beans for fighting alongside us on the southern lines and in recognition of being the sort of esteemed friend who assisted us with our withdrawal.

## THE SAME DAY, THE GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

A man with a gloomy expression delivered a dark report in a room that felt

nothing short of oppressive. An objective view of the speaker at the General Staff Office Operations meeting would look like that.

Though he could hear his own internal cynic laughing, Colonel Lergen made a point of speaking dispassionately.

"And those are the prep materials related to the breakthrough operation from Supreme Command. The government has high expectations of us in the General Staff."

"…Draw troops from the southern border, and if that's not possible, 'consider' acquiring a surplus via a military incapacitation of Ildoa?"

General Rudersdorf had been listening in silence up until this point, and his face was pale. Without even looking in a mirror, Lergen could guess his face was a similar hue.

This was a beeline toward the catastrophe that should have been avoided.

The brakes that should have kept the Empire's politics from heading down the wrong path were broken. No, it was more like instead of hitting the brakes, the driver had kept their foot on the gas.

"'Make a military invasion of Ildoa an option' is quite an order. The politicians and bureaucrats are quite courageous, talking so big from behind their desks." The general's face was brimming with sarcasm as he snorted and brought his cigar to his mouth. "True bravery means acknowledging your cowardice… Invade Ildoa? Win or lose, it can only end in untold tragedy."

Lergen remained silent but had no choice but to nod. It was essentially the Empire versus the other major countries. What could possibly change from swinging at the one who barely counted as a middling power?

Even if it went well, it wouldn't amount to much. They would just be able to send ten or so divisions into the quagmire of the east. And that was the optimistic prognosis assuming everything went according to plan!

"Colonel, let's think realistically. For now, how about we set aside the idea of invading Ildoa and consider how many troops we can muster."

It's a staff officer's job to advise that this proposal is impossible. When everything has been tried, and there's still no hope of success, they need to point out reality.

That was the basic education given at war college, and it was the part that Lergen now resented.

Even doctors suffer when they have to tell a patient how much longer they have to live. Pronouncing your Heimat's fate was agonizing enough to elicit

groans.

"…General, we've considered that multiple times already."

"We know the numbers. I'm saying now we have to consider the idea of taking them."

"General, it's impossible to recruit any more troops." Lergen made a point of dispassionately repeating himself. He didn't want to say any more than that.

"Colonel, I'll say it again. It's about giving the order to make the impossible possible. The competent troops we could potentially dispatch are currently in charge of defending the southern border. They're the only ones with the adequate numbers. Figure it out."

"The border defense unit in the south isn't just sitting there idle, sir! They've already been pared down to the absolute minimum! Considering how badly disrupted our interior lines strategy has gotten, it would be too dangerous to subtract any more!"

They had already pared down to the safety margin. That was the current situation of every regional army group. Pouring a huge number of men and matériel into the eastern front while still supporting all other army groups was more than even the Empire could bear.

"What about compensating with defensive positions?"

"…It'll negatively impact diplomatic matters. That comes into direct conflict with the General Staff's aim of cultivating friendly relations."

"So we're so considerate we don't even build defensive positions? Well, I suppose Ildoa is an ally. Not much we can do."

*Yes, that's right. A problematic yet dear ally—that's exactly what Ildoa is.* There was no reason to believe they would attack the Empire.

But it all depended.

It was true that even if they left the border as good as empty, there was little reason to believe Ildoa would be eager to abandon the Empire in pursuit of geopolitical aims. Ildoa was a reliable intermediary and a good broker. It would buy the things it was expected to buy and sell the things it was expected to sell. That was a conclusion drawn purely based on calculated interests.

That being said, there was still a chance that Ildoa's interests could induce it to attack the Empire if the opportunity was too good to pass up.

The forces garrisoning the border acted as a deterrent. In order to maintain

this precarious alliance, they couldn't be moved.

"So we can conclude that drawing troops from there would be problematic. We've already taken as many as possible."

"And we can't overtly treat them as potential enemies like in the east and west. There's our reputation to think of. But…supposing we didn't care, I'd like to set a goal for when we can get the positions built and the troops taken. How long do you think it will take?"

"I've gotten a lay of the land after numerous trips going back and forth between here and Ildoa—the issue is topography."

The majority of the Ildoa-Empire border region was mountainous. Since that made it difficult to attack and easy to defend, they had gotten by with minimal defenses and personnel.

*But…*

Lergen had to point something out with a somber expression.

"Repairing the mountain road plus constructing a ropeway for transporting ammunition won't be easy. Especially with our field engineers, equipment is part of the problem. Even the troops in the field aren't being issued enough equipment."

The eastern front again. Like Rudersdorf, who was listening with a look on his face like he couldn't wait to be liberated from the problem of the eastern front, Lergen, too, cursed the massive drain on resources from the bottom of his heart.

"Colonel, how well outfitted was the area before the war?"

"There's nothing more than a basic garrison. They're just now finally starting to expand with an air base."

"We didn't ask for anything more from the local unit than a mobile defense that could be dispatched to the mountains in a hurry, so I suppose that's what we get."

"…If anything happened, the plan was to have the Great Army take care of the rest…"

"Right. And we can't very well bring those troops back from the east."

The collapse of their main thrust plagued them here, too. A failure at the strategic level had left imperial authorities with no choice but to flail for any handhold they could find.

"Then I guess the only measure we can take to draw off troops is to fundamentally change the status quo. We'll crush Ildoa and then send

everyone but the occupying forces to the east."

"That's such a bad idea it's not even worth debating."

"What a harsh critique, Colonel."

"Unfortunately, I'm merely pointing out the truth. General, I'm sure even you are aware."

"You're not wrong."

This general who hated beating around the bush…was doing exactly that. The source of that hesitation and even palpable hatred was the height of follies—*war against Ildoa*.

"Our readiness for a war against Ildoa is an unmitigated disaster. How did it look to you on the ground, Colonel?"

"I made inspections on multiple occasions. The current Southern Army Group mainly consists of reserve divisions stationed there on the assumption that they would only be relied on for defense—and a delaying defense at that. Though they meet the minimum head count in each area, the divisions might as well be hollow."

The barrel of forces they could use for an offensive had been scraped clean long ago.

The Empire and the Imperial Army were struggling to even conduct their defensive maneuver battles in the east.

*Just take a look at the Salamander Kampfgruppe awkwardly being called the Lergen Kampfgruppe, and it's plain to see.*

Most of the heavy equipment had some sort of defect, and the artillery and tanks were getting emergency maintenance in the home country.

A kampfgruppe stationed in the rear to use up their leave. By prewar standards, the unit was overdue for a top-down reconstitution.

But today it was rated as "an exceedingly powerful fighting force" without any hint of sarcasm or humor.

"Even the phrase *war against Ildoa* is a fantasy." Having seen the situation on the ground, Lergen felt compelled to say it explicitly. "If the higher-ups are telling us to attack, they at least have to provide a breakthrough force. It would be far too difficult to take troops from units occupying Dacia or the Entente Alliance, and as the Western Army Group needs to defend the coast, they are likely to send a request for reinforcements right back to us."

"Which simply brings us back to 'Take troops from the east.' Except

that'd be missing the entire point."

Lergen was dismissing the idea out of hand. But as far as he could tell, Rudersdorf wasn't rejecting it as readily.

He could imagine how the general felt on the inside.

"So, General, you accept the current situation?"

"…The excessive focus on the eastern front is also a running problem. I'm sure you're aware of that, Colonel."

The great quagmire the Imperial Army found itself stuck in. This battle of attrition on the eastern front. The objective was to defend the Empire. The target was the enemy field army. Sadly, they had utterly failed to annihilate that very field army.

Strictly speaking, they had defeated the enemy on several occasions. By the military textbook definition, some might even say that they had broken the foundations of the Federation Army soundly enough to call it annihilation.

But the Federation Army was as fit as ever. Meanwhile, the Imperial Army was struggling through major operation after major operation. Which is not to say that the enemy was enjoying a carefree time, but the Empire was undeniably running out of energy.

"…How about that voluntary division? With that, couldn't we pull a division out of the east for reorganization?"

"You're saying that a division we aren't even sure if we can use would be able to replace a division that is capable of attacking? With all due respect, General, will that kind of extravagance fly on the eastern front?"

Lergen offered the frank viewpoint as if by instinct, but he understood all too well that Rudersdorf had no choice but to pull a division from the east.

Originally, the Imperial Army was meant to have fewer troops in the regional army groups and a higher concentration of mobile forces, represented chiefly by the Great Army.

In any case, the Empire was traditionally partial to the idea of being prepared for rapid response. When surrounded by potential enemies, their predecessors had taught them that having strategic reserves was essential in order to seize the initiative and exploit breakthroughs.

It was impossible to forget how they got hit in the Rhine by the Republic while their strategic reserves were committed to Norden. That had been terrifying. And the way all their forces were committed to the east now

resembled that error all too closely.

"We simply don't have any pieces we can play. That's what it comes down to."

"…General?"

"Nothing. We'll fight with what we have. That goes without saying. Just because you get dealt a bad hand doesn't mean you can drop out of the game."

Taking a cue from his cigar-puffing superior, Lergen lit a cigarette. This wasn't the sort of subject matter he could comfortably discuss without nicotine.

The fact was that since the start of the war, he had become a heavy smoker, but as the quality and quantity of cigarettes they were issued decreased, he grew increasingly annoyed.

Even Lergen, one of the core figures in the General Staff, was anxious about his cigarette supply. How many things could illustrate the Empire's matériel mobilization issues better than that?

Piling up ashes in the ashtray, Rudersdorf realized they were wasting time and forced himself to speak. "…What's the situation like in Ildoa?"

"Down there? Well, even they're using a mix of gendarmerie and soldiers working together…but they've also got multiple alpine units in reserve."

Not the faceup cards shown during exercises. The real threat. The cornerstone of the Ildoan forces—their alpine units. Lergen was no expert in intelligence on Ildoa, but as an Operations man, one glimpse at their troops was enough to give him a rough idea.

Every time he went back and forth, he made some excuse to do an inspection—and they were the real deal.

"General, I think Ildoa is probably capable of mounting a rapid response."

"How about their equipment and skill?"

"As far as I saw in their exercises, there is only one optimistic thing I can say. I think we should be able to safely ignore their ability to logistically support an offensive of any significant duration. Their gear is a jumble from several different countries, so we can expect some confusion on that end as well." But there was a more important, painful truth that he ventured to report. "Their skill, however, is envy inducing in certain ways. They're more than well trained and even properly supplied."

"So an army of properly trained fully grown adults, huh?"

That was a luxury that the Empire could only dream of at this point. A well-trained soldier was more valuable than gold.

"The only saving grace is that they lack real combat experience."

On the battalion level, they were tight. They may not have had the combat experience, but they were apparently incorporating the lessons learned from studying the current war. Training—that is, the right training—could far surpass "simple" combat experience.

That is: They weren't sending military observers all over the place for no reason.

"Then our invasion will have to be literally lightning fast," the general grumbled.

A casual remark.

But the head of Operations had just said the word *invasion*. The significance was overwhelming. *Is that what you're thinking of, General?*

Before he knew it, he had a thought that made his face stiffen.

"It's not as if I'm for an invasion."

"Then what, sir?"

The general's eyes stopped on Lergen, containing a dangerous gleam.

"An army needs to have a plan; it needs to be able to act on assumptions. It's only with a concrete goal that we can expect soldiers to carry out missions. Am I wrong, Colonel Lergen?"

"No, sir, it's as you say."

As he apologized for his rudeness, he felt a strange chill.

"That said, this problem will take some consideration. We'll need to give it some more thought later on. Thanks, Colonel Lergen."

"It was nothing, sir. I'll be going, then."

"Colonel, one last thing."

Lergen had stood up and was about to leave the room when Rudersdorf casually lobbed a bomb at his back.

"We'll see what happens with Ildoa, but in the meantime, have the Lergen Kampfgruppe conduct a topographical survey, just in case."

"…Understood."

As he saluted and took his leave, what was going through his mind? Resignation? Despair? *No, don't jump to conclusions.* Lergen shook his head as he walked down the hall of the General Staff Office.

A topographical survey. That was a general instruction that on its own

carried no implication of an attack. But Lergen saw the implication no matter how he tried to avert his eyes.

*Bringing a combat unit in at this juncture seems awfully significant.* That was what occupied his mind all along the way back to his desk.

Of course, committing research to paper and actual combat were two very different things. He took a cigarette out of his desk and lit it as he grumbled. "Someone in a position like the general would never approve a poorly planned invasion of Ildoa."

His comments to himself melted into his office.

"…At least, they shouldn't," Lergen spat limply, but then he shook his head.

Lieutenant General Zettour, Lieutenant General Rudersdorf—both of the deputy heads of staff he served were staff officers with excellent pedigrees.

They were by no means so rash as to pull the trigger of a fully automated suicide device.

*Ildoa is essential as an intermediary in order to end the war with terms.*

They had to end the war. If war was becoming an end instead of a means, they were putting the cart before the horse. *I see—fair-weather friends are rather unpleasant. You start to question their sincerity as well as the relationship itself.*

But in the end, it was only a friendship between states.

A bond of steel, light yet stronger than anything, and only formed when interests align. National interest, raison d'état—in the end, any decent person would find it revolting. Such was the banal evil of organizations.

"…A state has no perpetual enemies and no eternal allies. O Lord, let there be as many allies as possible for the fatherland."

A prayer. Sadly, he doubted whether it would get through.

It was the same old story. Enemies had to be defeated. Obviously, it would be preferable to have fewer of them. The reckless Stone Age bravery of seeking out enemies was not desirable in this century.

But someone in Rudersdorf's position had been forced to at least entertain a blitzkrieg invasion of Ildoa, even if it was only talk—that was the reality the Empire was facing.

*Nobody told me it would be like this.*

A soldier's duty was to avoid politics. Lergen himself, though a decent individual by his own measure, had racked up enough experience as an

instrument of an evil organization that it made him sick, but…in the end, he was still in a subordinate role.

Now, surprisingly, this colonel in the Imperial Army, Lergen, was beginning to feel an interest in politics stirring in his breast.

It beat in his chest with an echoing *ba-bum, ba-bum*.

Imperial soldiers were taught from the very beginning that this should be suppressed at every turn. The lesson had been beaten into him so often that it had long been internalized as one of his values. So the emotional voice in his mind screamed its appeals.

"…What should I do?"

But his mind, his reason pressed on, throwing off the emotional restraints. His brain cried out, *If the politicians are wrong, then perhaps it's the army's—nay, the soldiers' duty to correct them.*

And he couldn't continue to ignore this strange, ceaseless current. The atmosphere in the General Staff Office justified a qualm or two.

Nor could he feign ignorance of his superiors' thought processes. There was a limit to these things.

"…Plan B?"

How wretched it felt to be the one who had failed to carry out Plan A. He wanted to leave Plan B as Plan B forever. So he couldn't help but feel there was some hope in that direction.

"We stand with God? And we're meant to charge forth as he wishes? Without realizing our best chance has already come and gone, we continued believing an appropriate ending would be bestowed on us, and yet this is what we get?"

There should have been an escape route.

Open sesame.

The art of war that had been witnessed on the Rhine front was unforgettable. They had lured in the enemy field army and literally ripped them out by the roots.

The peace that followed the neutralization of the enemy field army was something the Empire had dreamed of, longed for, and thirsted for ever since its founding had been only a step away.

…Now, Lergen couldn't help but feel like that was ancient history.

He had believed they could win the war.

Back then, it had even been possible to think about a time "after the war."

*Where and how did things end up so horrible?!*

"If you know the eastern front, you understand. Hell begets hell. Nothing is shocking in total war. What a fate! We're stuck harvesting the seeds we sowed."

Iron and blood.

Though they originated with the founding of the country, the quantity was woefully inadequate for saving the fatherland from this great war. Young people—human beings with bright, promising futures—were turned into statistics and casualty numbers; pouring the nation's strength into this conflict was as foolish as heaving it away with great abandon straight into the muddy lands of the Federation.

And it still wasn't enough.

It was hard to believe, but war, this greedy monster, having swallowed up every last one of the Heimat's youths, continued to scream that it wasn't satisfied. How about that for an unpleasant reality? Battle lines extending without end, the continuous sowing of despair, and the horror of a world that continued to betray every expectation.

To think this would happen—to think the world would enter such an age!

Who could have seen this coming? During the Norden conflict, who besides one little girl even spared it more than a passing thought? Who would have guessed that this nightmare, this madness, was about to snowball out of control?

"…Be ready for whatever may happen. That's a soldier's job. I made a vow to the fatherland and the emperor, so it's my duty. I must do my duty."

If you spelled it out, that's exactly what it meant to be an officer.

Lergen himself was an outstanding cog—and nothing but a cog. But when it was unforgivable to remain a mere piece of the machinery, did the demands of his duty change?

"…Will I be forgiven if I remain as I am? What is the optimal route to carrying out my—no, our duty?"

The aiguillette he wore marked him as a staff officer. He had to fulfill his duty. But what duty was that? Was it a soldier's duty to get involved in politics? Was it his duty to remain silent as a "mere" staff officer?

It would be easy to make the excuse that the context had changed. But duty itself would haunt him eternally. He didn't know what it was he was supposed to do, but the responsibility he felt toward doing it tormented him.

*Ahhh, damn it all.*

*Do I have to take the plunge into politics despite being a soldier? Or am I supposed to remain silent in the face of the politicians and their agonizing cluelessness?*

Both choices were the worst. Not the worst and the second worst. They were both absolute shit.

"I'm supposed to choose? I…have to choose?"

When he glanced at the window, a sour face appeared. A haunting face. He was frowning as if he were the most unfortunate man in the world.

It was his own reflection floating in the glass, but even knowing that, he found it utterly shameful.

*I look exhausted. As an officer, I'm meant to set an example, to put on a brave front in the face of adversity, but…I guess I can't scrounge up what simply isn't there.*

*Smile.*

He ordered the muscles in his face to obey, but he didn't have the energy to laugh at the ludicrousness even if he wanted to.

"What path will lead to the sun rising again tomorrow?"

He responded to his own words with a cynical jab.

"…Will it even?"

He asked and answered his own question.

*There isn't a soul who doesn't hope daybreak will come. But will it? We'll see the sun tomorrow. And probably next month. And even a year from now, we should be able to manage it.*

*But what comes after that?*

*Where is the Empire headed?*

*Are we sure it's not night that waits for us?*

"…Pessimism? No wonder the staffer curriculum drilled into us that it's taboo."

Peering into the window glass, he saw an absolutely haggard face. It was just so awful looking. Heading toward the night made him feel incredibly uneasy.

"…Night, huh? The horror. But who among us can escape the night?"

*(The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Vol. 9: Omnes una Manet Nox, fin)*


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# Appendixes

Mapped Outline of History

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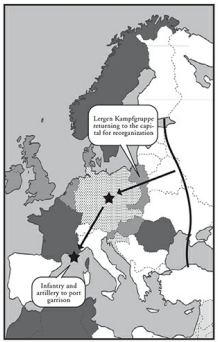


### Deadlock on the Eastern and Western Fronts

Interception battles in the west mean attrition for both the Empire and the Republic.

Defensive battles in the east prolong the deadlock as the two repeatedly trade time and ground.

The Imperial Army has reached the point where preserving the status quo on both fronts is gradually becoming its main objective.

*The Lergen Kampfgruppe returns from the east to begin its reorganization in the imperial capital.

### The Operation to Withdraw from the Southern Continent

Negotiations to withdraw troops via Ildoa fail.

Hearing that news, the Imperial Army General Staff decides to forcibly withdraw the troops, knowing it will entail a clash with the Commonwealth Navy.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion receives V-2s. They get dispatched as a detachment to assist in the withdrawal from the southern continent.

Afterward, they clash with the Commonwealth Navy at sea and deal severe damage to the enemy squadron, including capital ships.

### Exchange Program

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion enters an Ildoan port aboard a submarine.

Their neutral ally welcomes them, and both sides observe diplomatic niceties and strive to confirm their friendship.

A Commonwealth commando unit attacks a port base and clashes with core elements of the Lergen Kampfgruppe.

The base manages to just barely repel the attack, exposing a weakness in the Empire's underbelly.

**General Commentary**

The flow of troops reflects each side's attempts to seize the initiative while a precarious balance continues to persist.

In terms of freedom to take action, it's clear that the Empire can still conduct operations at will.

The only problem is how it uses it.

At present, the Empire has an increasingly desperate need for victory.



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# Afterword

Good day, hello, good evening. It's Carlo Zen.

Could it be that you have purchased all nine volumes of *The Saga of Tanya the Evil* at once? If so, may your future be happy. And to everyone else who graces me with your continued patronage, you have my usual gratitude.

Time moves fast, but in the great flow of history, a few months might as well be a butterfly's dream.

It's nearly impossible to believe, but anyway, as it stands, I can say with confidence that I managed to basically put out Volume 9 in the fall, right?

Come to think of it, things turned out just as I, deeply committed as I am, announced they would last June. Apologies again for the drama of being late.

The main silver lining is that I'm able to report that an all-new feature-length anime film is in production. I've been incredibly busy with that…so you see, it makes for a nice excuse.

To think *The Saga of Tanya the Evil* will be entering movie theaters… I can hardly believe it, but it is my intention to work hard so as not to bring shame upon the genre of works that feature magic + girl + skies.

Of course, getting this far was only possible with the energy of a great many people. This book was no exception, as I received lots of help.

To illustrator Shinobu Shinotsuki, the designers at Tsubakiya Design, the proofreaders at Tokyo Publishing Service, my editors Fujita and Tamai, thank you.

And to you readers who are patient with me when I'm late, my apologies and gratitude. There are so many things I'd like to talk about, like the upcoming movie, but please forgive me if I omit those thoughts this time due to space constraints and various life happenings.

I'm sure I'll make a fuss when there is more to report. I hope you'll warmly follow that progress.

Hope to see you next time.

January 2018 ***Carlo Zen***



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1 ***élan vital*** An esprit de corps that is a major element of the French Army's doctrine.


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